

THE *Stage* IS Set

A SAPPHIC ROMANTASY NOVELLA



LILIANA PISARKA

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~ ACT I ~

The Partyn Museum

Outside

THE DOOR to the carriage swung open before the horses had fully stopped. Zosia yelled a quick thanks to the driver as she leapt into the street, rain pummeling her hair and uniform. Her boots splashed long streaks through the puddles, but any concerns about soggy clothes were pushed away as she hurried up the path to the museum.

The courtyard should have been dark and quiet at this time of night. Instead, it was an explosive exhibit of commotion. Circles of light prowled through the gloom, shooting out in beacons from cylinders of hammered metal. Within each contraption was a large, golden crystal as bright as the sun.

Police officers manned the searchlights, guiding the light circles up and down the many-windowed walls of the museum. Zosia averted her eyes from the blinding beams as she hurried through the courtyard.

Several officers crouched or walked across the grounds, unwinding spools of bright orange rope to close off the scene from curious pedestrians. Zosia wondered if there was anyone in Partyn nosy enough to brave the midnight deluge to come snooping. The late summer air currently lacked a real bite, but with the alternative being a warm and cozy bed, it didn't seem like a difficult choice to make.

Unfortunately, she didn't get a say in the matter. She had a job to do.

Zosia stepped over a tendril of rope, eliciting an outraged look from the policewoman pushing the spool. A quick lift of the lapel of Zosia's jacket to flash her badge silenced the complaint as recognition dawned on the other woman's face.

"Oh, Detective!" the policewoman called, leaning back on her heels to blink up at Zosia through the downpour. She dropped the length of rope in her hands. It splashed into a puddle. "I remember you from this afternoon. Novak, right? Tough first day, eh?"

"It's certainly an exciting one." Zosia replied, squinting against the rain. She didn't recognize the woman, but that wasn't a surprise. Her introductory speech at the office had been quick and one-sided, as per the

instructions she had been given. “Sorry, do you know where Chief Ainsley is?”

“Ah, of course.” The policewoman nodded to the museum steps. “Over there. Best hurry.”

Zosia nodded her thanks and hurried forward.

The museum courtyard was paved with thin sandstone slates chipped off the cliffs at the southern shore of the continent. They were usually a cheery golden yellow, meant to welcome visitors while they waited in the long lines that the Partyn Museum was infamous for, but tonight the stone was dyed dark from the rain. The thin specks of mica reflected the flashing searchlights.

Zosia strode up the sloping path to reach the stairs at the museum’s grand entrance. A woman in a thick jacket stood there, just beneath the overhang protecting the front doors. She barked orders, one of her heavy boots propped up on an overturned spool, its orange rope long gone. Officers scuttled around her, buzzing to her commands like bees to their queen.

“Detective Novak,” Chief Ainsley grunted, eyeing Zosia’s approach. Her eyes, as gray as her hair, squinted out into the wet night. Her decorated chief’s cap was noticeably absent. Zosia imagined it was still on display on the hook by the office door where it had been that afternoon.

The chief roughly swept an arm towards herself. “Get over here.”

Zosia wasted no time climbing the stairs. A particularly heavy raindrop splashed on Zosia’s nose right before she stepped into the safety of the overhang.

“Glad you could make it on such short notice,” the chief said, eyeing Zosia like one would a racehorse before placing a bet.

Zosia flattened her hand and brought it swiftly to her forehead in a salute. She began to reply but was cut off by the chief’s bellow.

“Officers!” The chief squinted at a group crowded around one of the searchlights. “Where in the void are you shining that thing!? We need light on the upper level—higher!”

“On it, Chief!”

The chief grumbled as she ran a hand through the thin strands plastered to her skull. “Kids these days are too desk-happy. It shows during a mission.” She leveled a heavy look at Zosia. “But I don’t have to lecture *you*, Novak. Do I?”

“No, Chief,” Zosia replied promptly. “In fact, I’d like to get right to it. May I request a status report?”

The chief chuckled, the sound rough like gravel. She jerked her head and started walking. Zosia followed close behind.

“There was an unlocked door in the East Wing—the handicapped entrance in the opera history exhibit, I think. The museum employee who found it panicked and pulled the alarm. Useless.” The chief spat. The blob plopped to the ground below and was quickly consumed by the rain. “No signs of a break-in, at least not yet. Just stupid museum employees.”

“I see.” Zosia stopped a few steps behind the chief. She eyed the closed double doors in front of them. “And the jewels?”

The chief’s hawk-like eyes swooped back to Zosia. “I’ve got my best up there. They didn’t budge when the alarm went off. Can’t say the same for the museum personnel.” She sighed. “I told the museum manager and the mayor that it was a stupid idea, that we could handle it ourselves, but why would they listen to me? I’m only their damn police chief.” She huffed an unamused laugh as she directed a brisk sweep of her hand at the two officers standing near the doors. They scattered out of the way.

“Chief,” Zosia said, straightening up as tall as she could. “I’d like to head to the exhibit, if I may.”

The chief raised a thin eyebrow. “Now why would you want to do that, Novak? You’re here to track the clues. Which, naturally, don’t turn up until *after* a crime.”

“You’re right,” Zosia replied. “But familiarizing myself with the exhibit in its original state would make it easier to spot any changes or alterations, should they occur.”

“Hmmm,” the chief said. “I suppose that makes sense. And I guess that’s on me for not sending you by this afternoon.” She tapped a finger against her arm, then pointed it at Zosia. “It might be dangerous. That’s why I have the martial unit up there.”

Zosia held steady, not flinching away from the finger jabbed her way. “I understand. I’ll just walk around and keep an extra eye out. Besides,” she added confidently, “we had combat training at Minthol’s Academy. I won’t be a burden on the other officers if it comes to it.”

The chief sighed into the mist, her breath mixing with the crisp night air.

“Well, I won’t stop someone from working. Youngsters.” She slapped a scarred hand on the golden door handle. The carved lion appeared to be

frozen in a yawn beneath her grasp. “I suppose since we’ve all been dragged out of bed on this spirits-forsaken night, we might as well play the part.” She leveled a look at Zosia. “I know we’re throwing you in deep here, but you came highly recommended. That fancy academy doesn’t put in a good word for just anyone. I trust you’ll do what needs to be done.”

Zosia nodded. “I’ll try my best, Chief.”

“Excellent.”

Shouts echoed around the courtyard. A moment later, a red-faced officer scrambled up the steps, nearly falling on the wet stone as he slid to a halt in front of the chief and Zosia.

“M-movement!” he yelled, “Upper level, North wing!” He sucked in a breath. “A-although...”

“Although what?” Chief Ainsley snapped. “Spit it out.”

“I-it might have been an animal,” he scratched at the wet tufts of hair peeking out from beneath his soggy cap. “We’re not sure.”

Zosia tensed. Her eyes flicked to the upper sections of the museum that curved around the courtyard. Circles of light raced across the tall windows, fixing the full force of the sun on a fourth-floor window. The beacon was so intense against the misty darkness that Zosia couldn’t tell if the light was playing tricks or if there really were shadows lurking through the glass far above.

Either way, she couldn’t do anything from down here.

“Unbelievable,” the chief growled at the officer. She turned to Zosia, looking older than she had moments before. “Well, better safe than robbed. I don’t want to deal with the damn mayor again anytime soon.” She gestured roughly towards Zosia. “I’ll give it a few minutes, and then we’ll send you in.”

The chief grumbled as she shuffled around in the deep pockets of her heavy-weight coat.

“Of course,” Zosia said, giving a pitying look at the officer. He was likely to get an earful from the chief no matter the outcome. “Just, Chief—one thing?”

The woman grunted, but didn’t look up as she continued to dig through her coat. Zosia took it as a sign to continue.

“If you remember from earlier—what I suggested about preserving clues at a crime scene? If something does happen tonight, it’s best to keep the regular officers stationed outside, ready for my call. The notes from the last

mission said the trail was ruined due to a stampede. If that happens again, we'll have nothing."

"And we're out of time for that kind of shit," the chief agreed with a grimace. She yanked something out from one of her inner pockets. It was a small, curved object with a pointed tip, not unlike a drinking horn. "So yes. Whatever you say, Novak."

The chief tapped the horn once with her finger. A low humming sound began to play from inside. She held the device up to her ear, with the thin part curving down towards her mouth. "Guard room stand by," she said to the device.

No voices emerged. The horn hummed quietly and unhelpfully as the rain continued in a soft hiss against the stones of the courtyard.

"Guard room, do you hear me?" she called again into the horn. She held out the device, giving it an angry shake. "These stupid fucking things. Never work. Guard room? GUARD ROOM?"

"Perhaps I should...?" Zosia gestured to the door.

"Yeah, fuck it." She tossed the horn roughly back into her pocket. "Get in there."

Zosia nodded, already stepping forward.

"Open the doors!" the chief bellowed.

A loud click echoed from the other side, and one half of the massive wooden doors pushed outward. It was a monstrous single piece of wood decorated with carvings. Pushed by two police officers from the inside, it swung in an arc wide enough to admit large streams of crowds on busy days. Zosia quickly stepped aside to avoid it.

"Novak."

Zosia paused with one foot on the threshold, looking back over her shoulder.

"If she *is* in there," the chief growled, "drag her the fuck out. I don't care if she comes screaming."

Zosia locked eyes with Chief Ainsley and gave a final salute. She swiveled to face the doorway, stepping out of the waxing and waning glow of the searchlights and into the darkness of the museum. She straightened her spine, held up her shoulders and narrowed her gaze in determination.

Tonight, like every night on a mission, could make or break her career.

The Partyn Museum

Inside

THE DOOR closed behind Zosia with a resounding thud.

The rabble of the police force and the grinding twist of the searchlight mechanisms dwindled to a distant whine, muffled through the door. The rain was a distant patter against the copper plates of the roof far above. Inside, the museum sat in a preserved quiet.

One of the two officers posted next to the door gave her a quick nod of encouragement. Then they returned to their positions, backs to the heavy wood.

Being new to the Partyn force, Zosia wasn't sure how many officers were currently on the team. Nor did she know how many had been summoned tonight. Still, it seemed like a poor use of their resources to post several officers and the chief themselves right at the main entrance. The museum was full of ways in, from windows to the various exits—any thief worth their title could easily find another route inside.

Noted, just in case.

Zosia straightened her jacket, not used to how low the sleeves on the new uniform fell over her wrists. She did a quick status check—aside from soaked shoes and a wet outer layer, she was in relatively good condition. Fighting condition, if it came to it. She brushed a hand over the holster on her thigh where her baton rested. That, at least, felt familiar.

The entrance hall lay ahead, a massive space with a ceiling that stretched so far above it felt like the sky. Pillars wide enough that it would take four grown people to link arms around stood guard at each corner of the grand room. The stained glass windows wrapped like a ribbon around the upper perimeter had no light to spare on this rainy night.

This left Zosia with nothing more than a few crystal lamps to see by. Their glow was easy on her tired eyes, nowhere near as strong as the sun crystals outside. They were moon crystals, and probably ones brought up from the mines during a full moon, judging by their steady glow. The lamps dotted the walls, creating bubbles of shimmering light evenly spaced throughout the gloom.

With a final glance at the officers by the door, Zosia headed inside. Her low heels clicked against the marble floor, the stone polished but well-worn from years of foot traffic. Without the crowds and school groups that no doubt filled this place to the edges during the day, the place felt hauntingly empty. Aside from the officers at the door and the martial unit stationed at the Crown Jewel Exhibit, it didn't appear that there were any other police officers around.

Are they following the chief's orders to stay on the perimeter? No interference would be nice, but Zosia was hesitant to hope. It didn't take 24 hours with the Partyn Police Department to see that they struggled when it came to organization.

Zosia passed the abandoned ticket booths, noting a half-consumed cup of juice resting on one of the counters. She could count on the police force to be unorganized, but the museum employees that Chief Ainsley had warned her about were a wild card. How many were here? And where were they? She would have to stay on her guard and be ready for anything.

The central staircase waited up ahead. Zosia weaved through a labyrinth of stanchions clustered around the ticketing area to reach it, the echo of her steps her only accompaniment.

The staircase rose from the entrance hall on the ground floor to the second level. Zosia ascended to find a map at the top of the stairs. She glanced at the museum layout, recording points of interest into her memory.

Pre-Empire Marzenian Artifacts – Room 1, Relics from the Lorelain Ruins – Room 2... Zosia scanned the exhibit names until her eyes caught on the list of locations on the fourth floor. *Fall of the Empire – Room 19. Exclusive Crown Jewels Exhibit – Room 19C.*

Taking a deep breath, Zosia continued up the next flight of stairs, ascending three more levels. She was only slightly out of breath by the time she stepped onto the fourth floor.

Across from her stretched a wall of windows, although at this time of night the panes of glass might as well have been dark canvases. There were two options to proceed: a hallway lined with portraits to the right, or a dark exhibit room marked Room 18 that sat quietly to the left.

Zosia turned right.

The eyes of rulers from distant lands and bygone eras watched her as she walked down the hallway. Every so often, Zosia passed a stone bust. Their carved faces seemed even emptier than the oil-etched eyes staring blankly

from the trail of canvas, unseeing and frozen in time. While keeping her awareness focused on the path ahead, Zosia spared a few quick looks at the portraits.

Richter Irenblant, Etrina Marlen, Priscielle Yirma... Zosia couldn't help but be impressed. Every single portrait in the hall was the work of a master painter, the likes of which were highly sought by collectors. *As expected of the Partyn Museum. It might be worth coming back to explore the other exhibits sometime.*

A thump echoed up ahead.

Zosia slid against the wall, squeezing her body into the shadow of a stone bust of a long-gone queen.

A moment passed. No other sounds echoed in the space—only the constant caress of the rain on the roof.

With her heart rate picking up, Zosia reached into her pocket to pull out her compact. The circular case opened silently on well-oiled hinges, revealing two matching mirrors inside. She tilted them until one mirror reflected down the hallway.

Something was lying in the middle of the floor. It looked like a bundle on the faded carpet; an oddity that hadn't been there a moment before.

Zosia squinted into the mirror, but no matter how she angled it, she couldn't make out any further details. All she could tell was that whatever it was, it wasn't moving.

She snapped her compact closed and drew her baton. The hefty tool was carved from petrified Brineswood, as dark as midnight and stronger than steel. It felt right at home in her grip.

Zosia took a deep, grounding breath and slowly peered around the edge of her marble hiding spot. One of the searchlights passed over the windows, bathing the hallway in sunny yellow and illuminating the mysterious bundle on the floor. The momentary brightness revealed what the mirrors hadn't—deep maroon fabric, with buttons as gold as the lions on the door handle back in the entrance hall.

It was a person; one of the museum workers.

A glance further down the hallway, as well as a preventative look back the way she came, revealed nothing. For all she could tell, Zosia and whoever was lying in the hallway were alone.

The searchlight moved on and darkness flooded back into the hallway. The dim moon crystals placed sparsely along the wall did little to illuminate

the space. Zosia considered taking out her own personal moon crystal, only to think better of it. Something was going on here, and it would be in her best interests if no one saw her coming. The moon crystals on the walls would have to do.

Taking a deep breath, Zosia stepped out from behind the bust.

“Hello?” Zosia called to the worker on the floor, her voice just above a whisper.

The person didn’t move.

Zosia stepped closer. The person’s clothes were thoroughly wrinkled and crumpled. One hand was stretched forward, the other grasping into the carpet. It looked like they had dragged themselves, but there was no visible blood nor sign of injury. Their eyes were closed, but their sides were moving slightly. They were still breathing.

As she leaned down to try and determine the cause and potentially give them a wake-up shake, Zosia’s chest protested the action.

She sucked in a breath, then another. The air in the hallway was musty, but not in the way of old paint or tired stonework. It smelled of rotten leaves and decaying bark—more like the wooded trails in the mountains than the scents of a city museum. Zosia couldn’t seem to get enough air into her lungs. Each breath she took felt like a chore as the edges of her vision began to darken.

The stairs weren’t that strenuous. Maybe it’s the adrenaline, or...?

Zosia’s eyes widened. Her hand shot into her bag, yanking the flap back so she could snatch something from within.

She pressed the mask to her face just as the tendrils of darkness began to overcome her already limited sight. It took a few moments of deep, careful breathing for her heart rate to come back to normal. The air flowed through the mask, freshened with salt and a very expensive type of star crystal known as a cleanser stone. Even with the crystal purifying the air, it took a few precious moments to clear the toxicity from her lungs.

Jenipir gas—made from a special type of berry from the Kavtes’an Mountains across the sea. It takes a while to be absorbed, but once you breathe too much you’re out for hours.

“Tricky,” Zosia mumbled into her mask. She was lucky she had remembered to pack it in her mission bag, or else she would likely be out cold on the floor next to the museum worker. She tied the strings around the

back of her head, pulling once to make sure it was secure, and stood up slowly.

Stepping around the sleeping person, she felt assured that they would wake up and be fine, if not a little disorientated, in a few hours.

The fact that this gas was here signaled that something wasn't going according to the chief's plan. It was now more than likely that *she* was here.

Zosia clenched her fists, then relaxed them, as she looked down the hall.

Straight ahead, Room 19C waited.

The Partyn Museum

Crown Jewels Exhibit: Foyer

THERE WERE two more unconscious people outside the entrance to the exhibit. One, another museum guard in their maroon uniform, was slumped against the wall. Their head rested against a stone bust as they slumbered. The other person lay in the middle of the doorway, serving as a rather macabre doorstep.

Zosia carefully stepped over his legs, noting the sharp uniform of the chief's martial guard. They were a special unit of the police force trained in close-quarters combat. Unfortunately for them, no amount of muscle could stop sleeping gas once it spread through your system.

She took a big step over his chest, careful not to clip his head with her boot, and entered the foyer leading to the exhibit of the crown jewels.

The foyer was dark and windowless. If there had been any crystal lamps—and there should have been, considering that this was where the guard was stationed—they had either been covered or destroyed. The only light was the scant glow from the hallway where Zosia had come from and the hazy silhouette of an open archway on the other side of the foyer.

Zosia blinked quickly, trying to force her eyes to adjust to the increased darkness. The looming shape of display cases gradually became distinguishable. They were arranged in two half circles on both sides of the room. As Zosia stepped forward, she glanced at the closest case. It was hard to make out, but it might have held a dress—perhaps a replication of an Imperial gown back from the days of the Empire. The next case appeared to have stacks of bowls or cups, but it was difficult to be sure.

Zosia's boot nudged something soft. She was three steps back in a heartbeat, swinging her baton in front of her.

Nothing moved.

Breathing heavily into her mask, Zosia stepped forward again cautiously, nudging the roadblock with the toe of her boot. Upon closer inspection, it was just another unconscious martial guard.

The breath she held eased into a sigh. Zosia made a note to be more careful where she stepped. Mindful of the display cases—which would be

excellent for hiding behind, she noted with a spike of anxiety—and the sleeping people scattered about the floor, Zosia made slow progress to the archway.

When she finally reached it, she paused at the threshold. She could already see the row of floor-to-ceiling windows along the wall in the room ahead. As soon as she stepped forward, Zosia would be visible to anyone lurking within the exhibit.

She craned her neck and scanned for movement, looking for anyone who wasn't face down on the ground. But aside from the occasional pass of a searchlight through the windows, the room appeared still. It was also curiously empty. Unlike the hallway and the foyer, Zosia couldn't spot a single body on the floor ahead.

She clutched her baton. With a deep inhale of crystal-cleansed air to brace herself, she stepped forward.

The Partyn Museum

Crown Jewels Exhibit

There was only one display in the Crown Jewel Exhibit, and the entire room was dedicated to the experience. The open space stretched as large as a theater.

Although Zosia couldn't make out the details on the ceiling, the shifts in color and hazy shapes hinted that a mural stretched overhead. Beneath her boots, the stone floor matched that of the museum's entrance hall, but here it was far less worn. Lamp holders dotted the walls, but only two glowed with moon crystals. Zosia took in everything quickly as her attention was drawn to the nearest display case.

The gold-leaf podium stood in a line of identical displays, placed proudly down the center of the room. Each podium was crowned with a glass box. When the light passed over the windows, the glass containers reflected it beautifully, almost shimmering from the light's caress. As Zosia leaned closer, she realized the glass was cut to magnify the item within. Nestled upon their cushions of purple silk, one to a podium, were the six crown jewels of the fallen Empire.

As if separate from the lights in the room, the gem in front of Zosia glimmered, more resplendent than the night sky. A quick glance down the line of podiums saw that the other nearby jewels shone dully against their cushions, but the one in front of Zosia gave off an alluring sparkle that was only visible when she leaned close.

This must be one of the real ones.

Her mission debrief had explained how the mayor, in a self-conscious panic, had ordered replacements carved from dyed common moonstone for the four gems that had already been stolen. The fakes were lovely, and probably enough to fool the public during daylight visiting hours. In natural light, no one would be able to tell. It was only now, at night with the lights down low, that the true gems revealed themselves with their entrancing, otherworldly sparkle that no moon crystal could ever hope to replicate.

Zosia felt a deep tug towards the gem resting on its purple cushion. Through the magnifying glass, it appeared to be the size of her hand. It was

astounding, flickering with light as if the galaxy itself had been chiseled into a stone. She had never seen a prettier crystal. The worth of just one would be immense; it was no wonder people were trying to steal them.

A footstep echoed through the room.

Zosia spun around, her baton out and ready. “Who’s there?”

“My, my,” a voice called through the dark. It was clearly a woman, her voice clear and almost musical, although the sound was slightly filtered to Zosia’s ears—as though the words were spoken through a veil. “What do we have here?”

A chill raced down Zosia’s back. She spun around, looking for the source.

There, behind the last display box at the far end of the room, stood a woman. Either she hadn’t been there or Zosia had somehow failed to notice her when she had entered the room.

Zosia stepped away from the podium, facing the suspicious arrival. The woman was dressed in the now familiar museum uniform. The knee-length skirt clung tight against the curve of long, bare legs. Down the front of her jacket marched an orderly line of golden buttons and a matching scarf wrapped around her head, hiding the lower half of her face. A few meandering curls of sunset pink hair escaped to fall against her forehead. As she took another step forward, Zosia could see intense green eyes that twinkled with a mischievous spark.

Zosia’s heart thundered in her chest. She was aware of the distance to the windows, the steps to the door behind her, the—

“Whatever you’re thinking of, don’t,” the woman replied easily. Her voice was smooth, flowing. Even beneath the fabric of the scarf, she projected it with the confidence of someone who wanted to be heard. “I work here. Just trying to do my job.”

She eyed Zosia with amusement. It might be a farce, but to Zosia, it looked like this woman thought she had all the time in the world.

“Pardon me,” Zosia said as lifted her baton, mindful of the stretch of marble floor separating them, “but you don’t seem like you work here.”

“Oh?” The woman tipped her head to the side. “What makes you think that?”

“The museum employees I encountered were, regrettably, unconscious,” Zosia said as she clutched her baton. “You are not.”

The woman tutted. “My coworkers are just taking a nap,” she said and Zosia could hear the smile tinting her words. Above the mask, the woman’s eyes dragged over Zosia like a rake over coals. “It is the middle of the night, after all.” She shrugged, as if it was an obvious assumption to make.

“Right.” Zosia raised an eyebrow. “And should I just pretend that we aren’t both wearing masks?”

The woman laughed at that, causing her scarf to billow slightly. Beneath the red fabric, Zosia saw the strap of something black—it couldn’t have been too different from Zosia’s own air purification mask.

The woman reached a hand up to gently re-secure her scarf behind her ear, hiding the corner of the mask from view. Zosia was starkly aware that her other hand remained behind her, unseen. “Well. At least mine is rather fashionable.”

“Mmmhmm,” Zosia replied. This woman was clearly playing games and Zosia was unsure whether or not she was concealing a weapon. She needed to tread carefully here—although unconscious, there were both museum workers and the martial guard lying about. A skirmish would be dangerous for everyone.

“Forgive me, but it’s rather suspicious that you’re the only museum worker who thought to bring a mask tonight.” Still holding her baton securely in her right hand, Zosia extended her left. “I’m going to need to see your museum badge.”

“Happily. Right after you show me your museum ticket—assuming you paid to visit? This establishment isn’t a charity, you know.”

Zosia scoffed. “I’m with the police.”

“Oh?” the woman looked surprised. “Is that so? Then I’ll need to see your police badge.”

“You’re at a crime scene.” Zosia resisted the urge to roll her eyes, instead keeping them trained on the woman in front of her. “There are bodies lying all the way down the hall. Tell me what police officer is going to be stupid enough to dig out their badge to show it to the only person in sight—the prime suspect?” Zosia lifted her baton a bit higher, threateningly. Her gaze dipped for half a second—enough time to note the strip of leather hugging tightly around the woman’s hip. The other workers hadn’t been wearing belts. *Could be a weapon there, too.*

“Some of them are,” the woman replied with a shrug, the playful look in her eyes pulling Zosia’s attention back to her face. “It was worth a try.”

“Careful with the insults. You’re talking to the police.”

“Oh, am I?” she drawled. “Still haven’t seen your badge.” She raked her eyes up and down Zosia. “Although you do *look* the part. That uniform? It really suits you.”

She took a measured step closer to Zosia. Shadows danced over her body, pooling in the curves accentuated by her uniform. She moved lithe and cat-like through the dark.

Zosia fought against the instinctual urge to step back. Instead, she held her ground and pointed the tip of her baton towards the woman’s chest.

“Keep your distance,” she said as she flicked the end of the baton towards the display cases, then back, “and answer my questions. Did you take a jewel?”

“A jewel?” the woman asked, flipping her free hand around in a gesture of ignorance. “What are you talking about?”

Zosia could feel the vein on her forehead begin to pulse. She’d played along for long enough. It was time to get to business.

“The jewels,” Zosia snapped, gesturing to the row of priceless stones, most of them fakes. Even the imitations, with their careful chiseling and high level of clarity, were likely each worth more than a year of her detective salary. The cases down the end of the hall were too far away in the dark to tell if they still contained an authentic crystal or not. “Did you take one or not?”

“Ah,” the woman said, nodding dramatically. “Those jewels. Well, now that you’ve mentioned it...” She shifted, her hidden arm moving, causing Zosia to tense. “I *may* have picked one up.”

Zosia stiffened as the woman’s previously concealed hand emerged from behind her. She wasn’t holding a weapon. Instead, one of the jewels was cradled in her gloved fingers. Free from its container, the gem was much smaller than it had appeared behind the magnified glass. It was actually about the size of an acorn. It glowed with a pulsing, almost alive light.

As Zosia watched, the woman held the jewel towards the windows, turning it this way and that. She spun the stone, her eyes looking at it casually, like how one would size up a tasty-looking pastry before taking a bite.

“You know, they’ve been parading them for days—even the fakes. It’s like they’re asking me to steal them.”

“I don’t suppose you’d give it to me if I asked,” Zosia said lowly, never taking her gaze from the other woman.

The thief laughed lightly. “What kind of a question is that? No, I don’t suppose I would. Although...”

In a flash, the easy-going look in her eyes was exchanged for something sharper. Zosia could almost picture a devilish grin beneath the fabric concealing her mouth. “You could try to take it from me.”

Zosia tightened her grip on the baton. “I might.”

The thief laughed lightly again, swinging her free arm behind her. This time, when it reappeared, it held a long, thin fencing blade. Zosia squashed the flicker of feeling impressed—it was a feat to have somehow hidden the weapon in her uniform. Still, in this situation, it wasn’t something she had time to admire.

The thief turned her sword to Zosia, the thin blade there and then gone in the dark. It didn’t take a detective to deduce that it was longer and significantly sharper than a baton. After all, Zosia’s weapon was meant for self-defense and intimidating the occasional threat into backing down. The chief had been right—it was the martial squad who was supposed to be handling any serious fighting. They, however, were out cold on the ground.

Zosia’s baton would have to do—but they both knew that Zosia’s chances of victory would be slim in a one-on-one battle. The thought was bitter in her mouth.

Meanwhile, the thief’s eyes were crinkled in what could only be a devious grin. She knew exactly how the stage was set.

Zosia’s mind raced. It would be stupid for her to try to engage directly with things not in her favor. Anyone could see that. Perhaps she could talk a viable way out of this?

“Why are you still here?” Zosia asked, keeping the woman in her line of sight. She wondered if the police in the courtyard would be able to see them from below, or if they were too far from the windows. “If you have the gem, shouldn’t you be long gone by now?”

A laugh, hearty and decidedly unhurried, echoed through the room. Zosia tensed.

“I was waiting for you.”

Zosia’s heart missed a beat at those words, distracting her as the thief stepped closer. Zosia pushed her baton, only for the other woman to press her chest against it. She looked at Zosia, as if goading her, as the wood

pressed slightly into the maroon fabric covering her breasts, denting into where her chest rose and fell. At the same time, her sword traced lightly over Zosia's side, catching on the hem of Zosia's jacket.

They were locked in a tense standoff with neither willing to make the first move. Outside, the police searchlight swung across the windows before moving on.

Zosia swallowed. *What a situation to be caught in.*

They were close enough that Zosia could smell a hint of the other woman's perfume. Even through her mask, she caught faded notes of toasted spices from the southern islands followed by something deeper that Zosia didn't have time to identify.

"Well?" the thief whispered.

Zosia's mind whirled, trying to spin up a reply, when a shout echoed from below. She couldn't tell if the sound was outside the window or inside the museum. A moment later, she recognized the bellow of Chief Ainsley. *Outside, then.*

In tandem with the chaos outside, Zosia could now also hear noises from somewhere far behind her—the hallway? It was too soon for the unconscious guards to wake up, so they must have sent in backup. *Not what I asked for, but so be it.*

"Ahhh," the thief sighed, Zosia's baton rising and dipping with the motion.

She didn't dare press her weapon any further, not with that deadly sword chasing patterns against her thigh.

"Looks like my time is just about up. I'd best be off." She gave Zosia a wink, tracing the flat of her thin blade just a bit higher.

It took every ounce of self-control for Zosia to repress a shiver at the blade's caress. She grit her teeth. "And what makes you think I'd let you go so easily?"

The gem shone in the light, still clutched in the thief's fingers. Down the hall, the voices were getting closer.

"While there are certain things I'd stay for," the thief said, giving Zosia a look that restarted the shivers down her back, "I'm afraid I really am out of time tonight. Besides... I have a feeling we'll meet again soon."

Someone shouted, close enough to almost make Zosia jump. *They must have found the bodies.*

“Well then,” the thief said. She hesitated for a moment, just as the searchlight swung back around. This time, however, the light froze—locked on the windows of the Crown Jewel Exhibit.

The woman stood framed in the pool of light as it spilled blindingly through the windows. Zosia squinted, trying to keep the thief in her line of sight. Like this, with her sword out and jewel clutched in hand, surrounded by a dazzling halo, she looked ethereal—equal parts alluring and dangerous.

She took a step backward to the window, causing Zosia’s baton to droop slightly.

Zosia’s stomach lurched. As if pulled by a magnet, she mirrored the thief’s motion, stepping forward, pressing her weapon back against the other woman, as if it would be enough to pin her in place. Zosia wanted to grab her—wanted to tear off the mask and wipe the smirk from her words. Conflicting emotions warred inside of Zosia, sharpening into the desire to keep this woman right where she was.

“You can’t just—” Zosia started.

A flash of silver whizzed by her ear. Zosia hadn’t even seen the blade swing up. Her mask slipped.

“Shit—!” she cried, clutching the mask over her mouth. Without it, she’d be no better off than the bodies on the floor.

The thief already had one leg propped up on the window ledge. The mirth was clear in her voice. “We’ll play again later, I’m sure. Just don’t make this too easy for me. Okay?”

In a smooth motion, she flipped her blade around, tightened her grip on the hilt, and slammed it into the window. The glass shattered at the impact, sending a storm of shards glittering into the searchlight beacons. Voices yelled in the courtyard.

Zosia started forward, her heart pounding against her rib cage as she pressed her broken mask over her nose and mouth. “Don’t—!”

The woman lifted the hand holding the jewel to her mask-covered lips. She tipped it slightly towards Zosia as she winked. Even with half of her face covered, the gesture was unmistakable.

Then, her long, toned legs tensing, she leaped through the space where the window had been with the grace of a cat—straight into the beacon of light.

From this height!?!

Shielding her eyes from the direct beacon, Zosia ran to the window. Glass crunched beneath her boots. There was a flash of pain in her hand as she gripped the jagged edge of the window, but she ignored it to scour the bricks of the courtyard far below.

She squinted into the rain and light-filled night, only to see the small faces of police officers in their dark uniforms looking back up at her. They continued to yell, pointing towards something that Zosia couldn't see. Laughter split the air, louder than the sound of the rain, but quickly faded into the distance.

The police continued to yell far below, and then in the room behind Zosia. She pulled her hand away from the window and clenched it, barely noticing the blood dripping onto the glass-strewn floor. In the burning light of the beacon, the red-coated shards sparkled like a thousand small jewels.

The Partyn Museum

Outside

“UNBELIEVABLE,” the chief huffed, arms crossed over her chest. She had been under the overhang at the entrance long enough for her hair to dry. The frizzy strands splayed restlessly around her scalp.

Zosia bowed her head, her good hand nestled in her pocket. Now that the adrenaline had faded, she was wet, cold, and completely exhausted.

“I’m sorry, Chi—” Zosia started, her apology interrupted as she winced. A medic held her other hand tightly as he wrapped the wound on her palm. The bandaging wasn’t as bad as when he had pulled out the shards, but it still hurt. The biggest blow, however, had been to her pride. Zosia had been careless. “I’ll investigate the scene further tomorrow, assuming...”

Assuming there’s anything left to find.

She didn’t bring up the fact that the officers had completely disregarded her request to avoid the scene and leave any evidence untouched. Anything that hadn’t been wrecked in their stomping and heavy-handed ‘investigating’ would likely end up in the trash. There would no doubt be a rush to tidy the museum before it opened to the public tomorrow, as per the mayor’s orders. He had, after all, a reputation and a promise to uphold to the voters of Partyn.

Chief Ainsley sighed, running a thick hand through her hair. It didn’t do anything to contain the rebellious strands. She stared out from beneath the awning into the courtyard, the wrinkles on her brow as deep as trenches. A few officers were still walking about, wrapping the sun crystals in heavy, light-proof cloth or rewinding the barrier rope. When they looked up and saw the chief staring, they dragged their water-logged boots into a scurry.

The medic tied the bandages on Zosia’s hand. This time she held in the wince of pain.

He gave a small nod of approval at his own work before looking up at the chief. “Well, I have to say I’m impressed that Detective Novak got close enough to encounter the thief at all. Detective Matin never even saw her.”

Zosia ducked her head; she didn’t feel like she deserved the praise.

“Thank you,” she said, nodding towards the bandages.

“Don’t mention it,” the medic said, closing his bag.

The chief only huffed, keeping her opinions to herself. She looked down at where Zosia sat on an overturned spool. “Novak, you’ll need to include those details in the police report later.”

“I will,” Zosia agreed.

“Mhm.” Chief Ainsley leveled her cold gaze on the medic. “You, back to the lobby. Keep an eye on the martial guard and send a messenger when they wake up. Novak, you’re on cleanup.”

The medic, who had begun to gather his things, glanced up at the chief. “I would recommend Detective Novak take it easy with that arm for at least a few days. It would be troublesome if the skin broke open again.”

The chief didn’t reply. She pulled a soggy paper bag from her pocket, taking out a tightly-wrapped roll of leaves and a small box. The box was labeled with a picture of matches—strips of paper dipped in a coating of flame crystal dust.

The medic and Zosia waited as the chief went through two matches before one lit. She held it to her rolled cigarette, which begrudgingly caught on, then tossed the spent match to the ground. She scuffed it in with her boot. “Fine.”

Chief Ainsley dismissed the medic with a curt nod. Zosia watched him go, stepping out from beneath the awning without a hood or umbrella. The rain had eased into a light drizzle. Without the spinning searchlights and yelling officers, the grounds had become almost as quiet as it had been inside the museum.

A few officers remained to dismantle the searchlights and heave the metal contraptions away. Zosia wondered if they’d bring them back to the station, or just leave them here. In line with her previous heists over the past four nights, the thief had only taken one of the gems. The final gem remained in the exhibit. There was no doubt the thief would back tomorrow.

“Go home and get some rest,” the chief said, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

Zosia stood up, careful to step over the rope spilling out from the overturned spool.

“I really am sorry, Chief,” she said as she ducked her head. Droplets of water slid down the loose strands of her hair, falling gracefully to disappear into the soggy ground. The rain hadn’t fallen beneath the awning, but the footsteps of countless officers had painted a muddy carpet all across the doorstep. The museum workers would have their hands full before the

museum opened in a few hours. She hoped it wouldn't be the same poor staff that had been caught in the sleeping gas.

"I admit I'd been hoping that this was the night we'd catch her," the chief said with a sigh. She pulled her cigarette from her lips, releasing another cloud of smoke. "It would've been great if we could've wrapped this one up here and now. But honestly, this thief has outwitted the entire force and my previous detective. It was foolish of me to hope you could put all the pieces together and nab her the day you arrive."

She pressed the cigarette back to her lips. The embers glowed red and dangerous. "Still. Now you've met your match. And you've got everything you need, I assume. Do whatever you must. The job is done tomorrow, one way or another."

Zosia nodded. The smoke felt scratchy in her throat.

"Now get outta here, Novak. I need you fresh and ready for whatever tomorrow brings."

Zosia snapped her body stiffly to attention. Her bones ached, and her hand was throbbing beneath the bandage.

Still, she saluted. "Yes, ma'am."

~ ACT II ~

The Police Station

Chief's Office

SUNLIGHT broke the window in streaks, leaping around stacks of folders to fall upon police reports that were scattered across shelves, cabinets, and the floor. Speckles of dust floated lackadaisically through the natural light, only to be swallowed up in the long chains of smoke puffing out of Chief Ainsley's mouth.

"Wires?" the chief said around the bundle in her mouth. Zosia hadn't gotten a strong whiff of it outside yesterday, but now that they were sitting in the chief's small office, the smell of the rolled herbs was almost as blinding as the sunlight to Zosia's tired senses.

She had barely slept at all, and had instead spent the rest of the night turning constantly on her borrowed bed. It had been impossible to shake the image of crystal shards and teasing green eyes emblazoned on the back of her eyelids. Thankfully, if the chief had noticed Zosia's dark circles, she hadn't said a word.

Outside the office, muted through the thin wall, the buzz of the secretary's summoning horn continued to hum.

"Wires," Zosia affirmed. She uncrossed her legs, unable to remember when she had crossed them. "I stopped by the museum before I came to the office this morning. There wasn't much left to see, but I did find a cable attached outside the window. I followed it to a tree just past the museum walls. A quick escape would be possible with a harness or some other apparatus."

"That's a new one," the chief grunted around her cigarette. She tossed the papers in her hand tiredly onto the desk. They joined another pile, which slid beneath the added weight—right into a cup that had been partially buried beneath the chaos. The chipped mug tipped over with a thunk, spreading dark brown liquid across the ocean of papers.

"Damn it." Chief Ainsley grumbled as Zosia hurried to snatch papers out of the way of the spreading tragedy. "I keep telling Angela to organize the files, but she never does. Who would have thought my last secretary would

be the worst?" The chief leaned back into her chair, eyes falling shut beneath the weight of her furrowed brows.

Zosia held up the papers that had been damaged. They dripped sadly onto the floor.

"No sweat," the chief said, cracking an eye open. "Toss those ones in the bin. You'll just have to give me your copy for now."

"Oh," Zosia paused, holding the ruined papers over the waste bucket. Drops of liquid fell into the bin, softly patting against the pile of rubbish already waiting within. "I'm afraid I'll have to write a new one up for you."

"You didn't make a copy?" the chief asked and Zosia could feel the judgment from the other woman. She constantly felt like she was being sized up for any potential failure—real or imagined.

"I did," Zosia assured, "but I keep all of my personal copies in code. Here."

Zosia set the ruined papers into the bucket, then took out a handkerchief from her pocket. She used the cloth to dry her hands as quickly as she could. When they were as clean as she could manage, she extracted her own files from within her bag.

The chief took them immediately, flipping the pages around, then upside down. After a moment, she huffed. Maybe it was her own pride reading too much into it, but Zosia thought she looked mildly impressed.

The chief tossed them across the table, avoiding the coffee puddle. "Huh. Indiscernible. Not bad."

"I'll make another copy and have it ready for your records tomorrow," Zosia promised.

Chief Ainsley tipped back in her chair, sliding against the worn leather. "That's fine." She jerked her chin towards the papers as Zosia picked them back up. "Seems like you've picked up our department's filing codes and formatting pretty well."

"I don't mind paperwork," Zosia replied humbly. She hadn't delivered a thief for the chief last night, but she could at least display competence when it came to paperwork.

The chief laughed roughly, some smoke coming out her nose. "The previous detective took four days to fill out the form properly. By the time he got it down, he'd already had enough of the job. I think most of his hair was gone, too." She made a sound that could have been another laugh or

perhaps a cough. The air in the office was hazy, full of the scent of dried herbs and smoke.

“Well then.” The chief leaned back, turning in her chair slightly to look out through the grimy windows. “You don’t have as much time as he did, I’m afraid. Only one gem left.”

“Apologies again, Chief,” Zosia said. She looked down at her hands clasped in front of her, one wrapped with fresh bandages. “I’ll try to perform better at the next mission.” Zosia paused to look up. “Will it be a stakeout this time, or...?”

“Oh, you bet,” the chief said. “The mayor was furious when he found out that we were just there by happenstance last night. He yelled and stomped around, probably all the way back to the crystal carvers to order the next replacement. We’ll have to tape the whole place up to keep a hold of that last gem.” She exhaled slowly, tendrils of smoke curling around her wrinkled face. Beneath her breath she mumbled, “Can’t fathom why they don’t just lock the damn thing up. Is their reputation that important to have it on display? Damn nobility. You’d have thought the Empire crashing down would have taught them something about pride. Guess not.” She pulled her cigarette to her mouth for another long, deep drag.

Zosia subtly cleared her mouth, trying to keep her breathing short. She vaguely wondered if she would need to have her uniform cleaned after this. The chief could get away with it, of course, but Zosia didn’t feel that it would be professional for a normal officer to reek of fumes.

Chief Ainsley gave Zosia another appraising look. Then she shifted as she relaxed into her chair, groaning at the motion. “Well, hopefully it’ll go smoothly tonight. And assuming it does, every night after that.” She made a noise that could have been either a laugh or a cough. “The irony isn’t lost on these old bones. The longer we successfully protect those silly stones, the more work it’s going to be for us.”

Zosia wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. After a moment of deliberation, she settled on, “Whatever happens, I’ll try my best.”

The chief tapped her cigarette onto a tray peeking out beneath the papers. The ashes tumbled as she ground the rolled herbs against the stone. “I’ll count on that, Novak. All things considered, I’m glad the academy could send someone so quickly.”

“I’m glad I had an opening between missions,” Zosia nodded. “It’s my pleasure to serve.”

The chief coughed as she nodded. It took her a few moments to settle herself, during which a quiet fell over the office. Zosia realized that the horn was still humming tirelessly outside.

Oblivious to the noise, the chief stared into space, lost in thought. Zosia was just wondering if that was a sign to excuse herself when the woman continued.

“If we let that thief walk over us again, it’s game over. You can’t even imagine the paperwork losing the last gem would cause. Unlike you, I’m not a fan of it. And I hate dealing with an angry mayor even more.”

“Understood, Chief.”

The chief nodded. Then she brushed her hand holding the cigarette towards the door. Zosia was torn between leaving and watching to make sure none of those red embers fell on the desk. One pool of spilled coffee wasn’t going to be enough to prevent the pile of papers from going up in flames.

After a moment of deliberation, she stood up to take her leave. She already had her hands full preventing one calamity; the chief would have to make do in her own office.

Her hand was turning the doorknob when the chief called out behind her.

“Oh—Novak.”

Zosia turned around as the chief gestured again. “I don’t know if this will help you in the case, but... maybe it’s worth mentioning. Every clue helps, right?”

Zosia nodded. “Agreed. What do you have?”

Chief Ainsley tapped her cigarette on the tray again, despite it still being still unladen with ash. She glanced at the door. Zosia, reading the hesitance in the chief’s eyes, pulled it shut tight again, closing them off from the rest of the office.

Satisfied, the chief leaned forward. Despite the fact that they were alone, her voice dropped into a raspy whisper.

“Before she was a shard in our sides, The Star was on the hunt in Marzena. She stole one of the Dire Crystals there too, remember?” She eyed Zosia pointedly, as if to double-check that she had read the related reports.

Zosia nodded; she had the reports memorized. Unlike common sun or moon crystals that provided light, star crystals were rarer and served a variety of miscellaneous purposes. The Dire Crystals were a legendary pair

of star crystals that were rumored to have once been a single stone. When the two halves were struck together, they sparked an inferno capable of ravaging entire cities—it was supposedly how the capital city of Lorelain had been razed back during the final days of the Empire.

Unlike the Dire Crystals, the Crown Jewels on display here in Partyn were, thankfully, much less dangerous. They had once sat in each of the six points on the Imperial Crown, making them both historical artifacts and exceptionally valuable. Zosia wasn't aware if they served any greater purpose than looking beautiful, though. There were no records of their uses that she could find. If they did have some greater ability or power, it hadn't been enough to save the Empress who once wore them.

"Of course," Zosia replied to the chief. "But there was only one Dire Crystal in Marzena. On its own, the half crystal is useless."

"That's true. Thankfully. But you're only looking at the surface, Novak." The chief grunted, her brows furrowed. "I reached out to the chief of the Marzenian police force. He thinks that all this nonsense with the recent heists—" Chief Ainsley gestured at the pile of paperwork on her desk "—might be bigger than it appears."

"Bigger?" Zosia straightened her back. "As in...?"

The chief nodded. "The public record and those dratted Marzenian reporters went on and on about the Dire Crystal. But that wasn't the only thing our thief stole. While she was digging around in Lord Hinterton's vault, she also grabbed a scroll. Not something of much monetary value, mind you. It was a historical artifact with some scribbles from the Advancement Age—and an item that a certain group was rumored to have their eye on." She paused. The air hung heavy with smoke. Zosia wished she could open one of the windows—it was reaching the point where it was difficult to breathe.

"W—" Zosia coughed, clearing her throat and, hopefully, her lungs, at least a little. "Ugh, excuse me. What else did the chief in Marzena tell you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"They seemed to think that our thief might be part of some larger crime organization. Perhaps..." she trailed off. Her gaze drifted back to the windows, the soft rays pulling shadows on the creases around her eyes. "...even the Under."

"The... Under?"

The chief wrapped her fingers together, her cigarette caged between, looking slightly uncomfortable. “The Under is a dark rumor that may or may not actually be out there. If there’s any truth to the whispers, it’s a small but elusive crime organization that has pulled the strings of some of the most elaborate heists. Nothing has ever been proven, though.”

Tension hung in the air, even thicker than the fumes of burning herbs.

The chief glanced up at Zosia. “I’m a bit surprised you haven’t heard of them, Detective. Perhaps they haven’t struck in Lythenor yet. Makes sense for a neutral territory, I suppose.” She sighed, then cracked a weary smile. The pressure lessened slightly. “Perhaps I should request a relocation over there.”

“They’d be lucky to have you,” Zosia said politely.

Outside, the horn started humming again. Zosia hadn’t realized it had stopped until the trembling vibration picked back up.

“That damn thing,” the chief growled. She waved her hand at Zosia. “Right! I’ve kept you long enough with rumors and hearsay. Never thought I’d end up like this. Thought I’d ease into retirement quietly, but that damn mayor won’t let me step down until this all over, one way or another.” She scowled, then relaxed, as if the effort of all this was too tedious for her to deal with.

“Thank you for telling me, Chief,” Zosia said, pressing her hand to her chest in a sign of sincerity. “It’d be nice if you got the retirement you’re dreaming of.”

The chief barked a laugh. “I appreciate that, Detective. Now go on—you’re dismissed.”

Zosia smiled as she twisted the doorknob and stepped outside the room. The wave of fresh air outside felt blissful in her chest.

“Oh!”

Zosia froze, then debated turning around. *Again? I shouldn’t have signed out from my shift before coming here...*

Somewhat hesitantly, Zosia turned around to glance back at her boss in the smoky room.

The chief yelled out, “Could you find Angela while you’re out there? Her break ended 15 minutes ago. The damn horn keeps ringing—when it goes off I can’t even hear myself think. Get her for me, will you, Novak?”

“Of course, Chief.”

The Police Station

Sure enough, the desk just outside the chief's office was deserted. The horn in question, much larger than the chief's portable one, hung on a frame of thin metal. It continued to hum, causing the desk and its eclectic assortment of items to shake slightly. A ceramic figurine of a dog with an oversized head trembled rather pitifully on the wood as Zosia passed.

The secretary's desk wasn't the only one that was unoccupied. As she walked down the middle of the large room serving as the upper office floor, Zosia spotted several desks that were empty—some housing folders, papers, or photos, while others sat barren, their surfaces collecting dust.

The scratch of quills was a quiet sound in the space, accompanied by the creak of wooden chairs and the brush of paper. A few curious heads looked up from their files or paperwork as Zosia passed. A couple of officers—likely those who had been present for her brief introduction speech yesterday or had been at the museum last night—offered her quick smiles or nods.

It wasn't until she had taken the stairs down to the first level and pushed open the double doors that she faced a tidal wave of noise.

While the second floor was reserved for officers and staff, the ground floor of the police building was open to the public. The waiting room was full to the edges this afternoon, leaving civilians to sit in long lines on the benches pressed against the corridor walls. The benches looked like late summer vines heavy with fruit so ripe they were about to burst. People perched straight-backed or prowled their small space like beasts in a cage. Many of them clutched little slips in their hands, each depicting a number that dictated their turn at the window.

A mother trying to hold onto three small children had Zosia stepping quickly out of their way, and she narrowly avoided walking into an elderly man who refused to take a seat. She passed the help windows—one was closed, the other one blocked by a large woman in a feathered top hat. As the lady howled about her neighbors to whatever poor secretary sat on the other side of the window, Zosia didn't know who was louder – the woman or the yapping dog she clutched to her bosom.

Zosia slipped outside with a sigh. The sun shone gently and the air was refreshingly crisp this afternoon. It felt warm with the lingering hint of summer but was edged with the promise of a cold night, tinged with the seasonal musk of autumn. The wind pushed against passerby as it chased fallen leaves along the road.

A giggle drew Zosia's attention. Two women were standing at the bottom of the stairs leading to the police building's entrance. Zosia recognized the secretary Angela, who turned away quickly when Zosia caught her eye. The other, a blonde woman whom Zosia had seen working at the public assistance window yesterday, gave Angela a playful push.

Zosia walked down the stairs, feeling slightly self-conscious.

"Excuse me, Angela?" Zosia called. She paused a few steps above where the women were standing. The blonde woman, with a huge grin on her face, gave Angela another pointed shove.

"Stop it!" Angela hissed to her friend before looking at Zosia. Her brown cheeks were dusted with red. "Oh, ah, Detective Novak. It's a pleasure to see you again." She tucked a curl of her short, dark hair behind her ear.

"Same to you," Zosia said. "Apologies. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Not at all!" Angela said, a little too loud. She gave a sharp look at her friend. "Mindy was just finishing up her break."

The smile melted off of Mindy's face.

"Guess I can't put it off any longer," she groaned. "I'll try to slip back out here for another break in two hours. See you then, Angela?"

Angela nodded, shooing her. Mindy laughed, stepping onto the bottom stair. She smiled at Zosia as she passed her, then disappeared inside the building.

"A shame we didn't have a chance to talk much yesterday," Angela said, turning to Zosia. "But I thought your introduction was lovely. And then there was that whole thing at the museum last night! I heard all about it. You've made *quite* the impression on your first day. It's impressive, really."

Zosia was a little taken aback. The mission had technically been a failure. So why was Angela looking at her like she had single-handedly saved the city?

"Not at all," Zosia replied honestly. "I wish it went better, but we'll try again tonight."

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Angela smiled. "So," she said, leaning to the side as she stretched her legs. She moved with all the stiffness of someone stuck

behind a desk most of the day. “What can I do for you, Detective?”

“The chief sent me,” Zosia replied. “She’s looking for you.”

Angela groaned. “Oh, she’s ridiculous, that one. Can’t do anything when I’m not around! Can’t get the horn, can’t tidy all those cursed files. Someone ought to remind her that I’m a secretary, not her maid. Well,” Angela huffed, “She can wait for me to finish my break.” She patted down her skirt somewhat aggressively, the lively pattern of orange and yellow that matched the season flattening beneath her touch.

“Anyways, with that out of the way—I’d love to chat a bit, since we didn’t have the chance yesterday.” She looked up at Zosia, blinking her brown eyes. They were large and charming in a way that reminded Zosia of the ceramic dog on Angela’s desk. “How are things going?”

“Oh, the case?” Zosia glanced across the road, where the trees still clutched onto most of their golden leaves. “Well, as you probably heard, we made contact with The Star—the thief—last night. But she got away with another gem.”

“Mm hm, sorry about that,” Angela said quickly, “but I wasn’t talking about work. I was asking about *you*. You got thrown into real doozy here, but you’ve been doing your best. You’ve become a bit of an enigma in the office.” She reached up to tuck the same curl of hair that she had fondled before back into place. “Tell me, what do you like to do for fun?”

“For fun?” Zosia’s gaze flicked up to the sky, as if it had the answers. “Uh, I guess... I like to read?”

“Detective novels, I assume?” Angela said, resting one of her fingers against her cheek. Her nails were perfectly manicured, painted with small pumpkins. Zosia noted the rate of her eyelashes—they seemed to be doing double time flitting against her cheeks.

“Yes, I... guess so.”

Angela grinned. “Well, mystery and crime stuff aren’t my favorite genres—working at the station kind of sucks the fun out of it for me, you know, but I’d make an exception. Would you like to go to a bookstore later? With me?”

Zosia took a moment to plan her reply. Angela wasn’t unattractive—she had a pretty face and dressed herself with a sharp eye for her best attributes. Not to mention that her curls were rather lovely. She was also well-positioned in the office, no doubt with plenty of connections. It wouldn’t be disadvantageous to get closer to the chief’s secretary.

Still, Zosia hesitated. From the depths of her mind, there was a flash of sharp green eyes and the dangerous glint of a wicked smile hidden beneath a mask. It was the same vision that had played over and over, keeping her awake throughout the night.

Zosia shoved the intruding thoughts out of her mind—*seriously, where did that come from?* She could think about the case later; right now she needed to gently handle Angela.

“That’s very nice of you to offer,” Zosia replied, “but I’m afraid that being in the middle of such a high-profile case doesn’t leave me with much free time.”

“Oh, give yourself a little breather!” Angela said, the hint of a whine in her voice. “It’ll just be for a bit.”

“Perhaps another time,” Zosia declined politely.

“Come on,” Angela pleaded. “Something else on your schedule?”

Zosia hesitated, slowly becoming uncomfortable. She didn’t want to be harsh to the other woman, but she also needed to get the message across that she wasn’t interested.

“There are some leads I need to follow.”

“And there it is—so hard-working! I heard that detectives from Minthol’s Academy were serious business, but you take it to the next level.” Angela sighed, a pout evident on her lips. She leaned back on her heels, eyeing Zosia appreciatively. “Though, I suppose dedication is a desirable trait too.” The curl of hair had broken free again, but Angela ignored it. She glanced back up at the station woefully.

Perhaps it was her imagination, but Zosia thought she could hear the horn humming from the second floor.

“Ahhh fine,” Angela said. “Back we go. See you later, Detective Novak.”

Zosia tried to keep the relief off her face.

“Goodbye, Angela,” Zosia replied with a smile.

The Cafe

THE SILVER BELL above the cafe door chimed merrily. Its song became a soft symphony with the creak of the wooden steps as Zosia climbed downward.

She had come to this quaint little cafe nestled beneath the streets of Partyn on her first day in town and had fallen in love with the dark wallpaper and mismatched furniture. Heavy with their books, shelves towered over her like sentinels against the wall as she made her way to the bar. Zosia resisted the urge to run her fingers over the neat lines of worn spines, their binding long dulled by curious hands and coffee stains.

After a moment of consideration at the counter, Zosia ordered a spiced tea.

The young barista scooped a generous heaping of spice mixture into a mug. He then took a glass tea kettle, filled it with water, and placed it carefully over a metal plate with a small shard of red in its center—a small piece of a flame crystal. Not particularly powerful and not worth a grander name, flame crystals were a lesser type of star crystal that got just hot enough to cause a spark or boil water for tea. It was another nice touch that made the cafe feel special.

Across the counter, Zosia got a waft of warm herbs and fragrant seasonings. She waited patiently for the water to boil, occupying herself by looking around.

A board had been nailed into the wall next to the counter. From the amount of paper covering the bulletin, it was clear that customers and hopeful entrepreneurs alike had taken advantage of the free advertising space. Zosia spotted everything from crystal carving classes to notices about lost pets to guided tours at the Lorelain Ruins.

A large promotional poster in the center stood out from all the rest. Its bright colors and thick black lines depicted two intertwined figures dancing in a garden of roses. *'The Lady's Gain'* was written in bold calligraphy beneath the image, followed by *'Now Showing at the Grand Opera and Theater'*. The edges of the pamphlet curled around the pins holding it to the board.

“Your drink, ma’am.”

“Thank you,” Zosia replied to the barista as she set a few coins on the counter. Made from packed crystal dust, they sparkled against the smooth wood.

With the spiced tea warming her hands, Zosia made her way to a back corner. The cafe was cradled in walls of thick, old stonework, but the ceiling was high enough to allow a few thin windows to let in light from the street above. Zosia sat beneath a window, setting down her mug and opening her bag to lay out the copies of her files. At ease in the low light of the cafe, the murmur of other clients and the distant hum of the streets outside were better than a massage. Zosia inhaled, then released, allowing the tension to seep out of her like tea in hot water. She felt far more relaxed in the cafe than at the police station, or even in the empty room she was renting. Here, despite her uniform, she was just one more face in the mingling crowd—as indiscernible as the code she currently studied.

She leaned over her papers as the scent of the tea filled the air. The steam tickled her nose and rose up to brush against moon crystals that dangled from a string above her head. Their gentle glow caused a memory to dredge up unbidden in Zosia’s mind. She recalled a similar scent in an entirely different place, which was quickly chased by that repeated vision of green eyes and the empty feeling of a sword teasing coldly against her thigh.

This is becoming ridiculous.

Zosia’s shoulders began to tense again. She willed them to relax, focusing instead on the curls of semi-transparent steam that rose from her mug. In them, she could almost see the shattered glass and that tall back disappearing into the blinding beacon. The woman’s words echoed in Zosia’s mind, just as they had haunted her restless mind all night: *“I have a feeling we’ll meet again soon.”*

But was Zosia ready to see her again?

What a pointless question. Zosia snatched her cup, nearly spilling it as she pulled it to her lips. The tea was scalding, but she swallowed it all the same. She had come to Partyn to do a job. Being comfortable with it—or rather, who it involved—was irrelevant.

Zosia shook her head, pushing the wispy memories aside in favor of the black and white text in front of her.

She flipped through the pages as she sipped her tea. After meticulously re-reading every document in her possession, she leaned her elbows against

the countertop with a sigh. On top of the neat pile in front of her sat her copy of the mission report from last night.

Zosia traced her finger over the note about the wires, before moving slowly back to her mug. She picked it up, realized what little tea was left was already cold, and, with a slight frown, swallowed it anyway.

The complex cables had been strong enough to carry a fully-grown woman across the length of the museum courtyard. *Perhaps something used in the mines?*

Zosia had read that the moon crystal mines in northern Minsbale had a similar contraption they used to maneuver workers through the deep caverns, where explosive crystals were too dangerous and a non-magical approach was required. But there were no mines anywhere around Partyn that could supply that type of equipment.

There was also the matter of the sun crystal beacons. Their light was intense, and Zosia had had to squint to see wherever they had been pointed. Yet the thief had managed to step right into the beam, find the hidden wire, and use some type of apparatus to fly herself to safety. From this, one didn't have to be a detective to deduce that she was experienced with the bright light of the nearly blinding crystals.

Zosia's finger tapped faster, thumping against her mug. The dredges of spice left at the bottom sloshed slightly in reply. A crease furrowed on her brow.

It wasn't just the complex wires or the lights. The flashy fencing, the showmanship... putting it all together, it didn't take much for a certain place to come to mind.

Zosia sat back on her stool. Her heels tapped thoughtfully against the dark wood of the cafe floor. She glanced across the cafe to the bar. The colorful pamphlet on the advertisement board stared back at her.

Our thief is not being all that careful.

Zosia pushed the stool neatly beneath the table and headed back up the stairs. The small bell chimed as she left.

The Grand Opera & Theater

Outside

THE SMOOTH, wide roads of Partyn's business district gradually narrowed into cobblestone streets as Zosia walked. The entertainment district was no older than the business district, but while the latter had been put through numerous rounds of construction to accommodate more carriages and trade deliveries, the former maintained its historic bones.

Despite being only mid-afternoon, the skies were darkening by the minute. A horde of heavy-looking clouds had claimed most of the heavens and were making short work of what little pale blue remained. Zosia watched the clouds with a scowl as she hurried her pace. The weather had been nice enough earlier that she hadn't thought to bring an umbrella.

Her boots clicked quickly over the rough stone as she turned the corner to the main thoroughfare of the district. All at once, the spreading darkness was chased back by the vibrant glow of Partyn's most colorful and busiest part of town.

She didn't have time to stop and marvel—the street was packed with carriages and people in elaborate clothes bustling about. It had also started to rain, thick drops falling heavily onto Zosia's clothes. Along with others who had forgotten their umbrellas, Zosia hurried to walk along the street's edge, taking advantage of whatever overhangs she could find. She hurried from one dry spot to the next. As she moved, she noticed that the sidewalks, wet with rain, had been inlaid with a complex design of stone, glass, and what appeared to be defunct crystals. No longer viable for light magic, they still made a pretty, albeit superfluous, decoration. No wonder this was the wealthiest part of Partyn.

Zosia was forced to step aside as a pair of ladies pushed up the sidewalk, twittering in their fur coats. Two people who appeared to be servants stumbled after them, their arms extended and clutching poles with crystals on top. From the crystals' lack of light and the odd bubble of air pulsing around the women, Zosia guessed that these were some type of star crystal. In their small, overlapping bubbles of dryness, the ladies hustled down the sidewalk, keeping their voluptuous furs out of the rain.

Zosia followed after them, slightly envious of their crystals and lamenting her lack of an umbrella.

Ahead, the stone stairs leading to the Grand Opera and Theater were slick with rain. Zosia's boots disturbed reflections of dazzling lights and large signs punctured with moon crystals in the thin layer of water clinging to the stone steps. The lights shone above and on all sides, propped onto the sides of multi-story buildings or hanging from rafters. The entire district was on display, calling out to passersby with the promise of fun and excitement.

Several arrows directed Zosia upward. They pointed to where the Grand Theater stood lording over it all, the undisputed king of the entertainment district. It defended its spot with pride at the end of the thoroughfare, boasting a domed roof that arched into the sky. Each of the spherical building's hundreds of windows beamed light into the darkness like a multifaceted lighthouse.

After waiting in a short line, Zosia approached the window box. The red paint decorating the frame glowed, lined with fragments of moon crystals that flickered enticingly.

"Good evening," the woman behind the window said without looking up. "Picking up tickets?"

"No, actually," Zosia replied, "I was wondering if I might buy a ticket? For tonight's showing of 'The Lady's Gain'."

"I'm afraid it's sold out, dear," the woman said, blinking up at Zosia through the glass. "It's quite a popular one. Every showing for the rest of the week has been booked. I'm sorry."

Zosia pressed her hands together. "Perhaps there were cancellations? Any unclaimed tickets?"

The woman reached for something beneath the window that Zosia couldn't see. After a second, she shook her head. "Not this early, I'm afraid, but you could try again ten minutes after curtain opens."

Zosia hesitated. It hadn't been her first choice, but she needed to get into the theater.

She lifted the flap of her jacket, revealing her police badge. "I didn't want to alarm you, but I'm actually here on police business." At the woman's startled look, Zosia quickly added, "There's no need to fear, though. It's just a very loose lead that needs to be checked. We do like to be thorough."

“Is that so?” The woman didn’t look convinced. To be fair, Zosia couldn’t blame her. Although she hadn’t been here long and the truth about the missing crystals wasn’t known publicly, it was clear that the current Partyn Police Department did not have a reputation for being all that dependable.

“Well,” the woman said, standing up off her stool to lean against the glass, eyeing Zosia’s badge. “I wasn’t sure when I saw your uniform, and I didn’t want to assume... but yes. In that case, let me see if any of the staff seats are still available.”

“Thank you,” Zosia said.

After shuffling through several large envelopes, the woman turned back to the window holding a small ticket. She slid it through the open space at the bottom of the window. “Here you are. Not the best seat in the house, but a seat all the same.”

“How much will that be?” Zosia asked, already pulling out her wallet to get the coins.

The woman flapped her hand in a warm dismissal. “No charge for you, dear. I hope you get whatever you came for.” She smiled. “Enjoy the show.”

After thanking the woman several more times, Zosia followed the gesture of a door attendant inside. Copies of the same poster she had seen at the cafe were posted edge to edge along the walls leading into the theater lobby.

The lights of the entertainment district outside were nothing compared to the vibrance within. The Grand Opera and Theater had been designed to impress, and it did its job glamorously. Yellow, orange, and red light shone from painted moon crystals embedded into the walls. They had been carved to resemble flames—a safer, purely aesthetic depiction of fire crystals. Overhead, a chandelier larger than any Zosia had seen dripped countless white and yellow crystal shards that twinkled like a sky full of falling stars.

Other theater-goers meandered about the space, standing in clusters around posters depicting future shows or sipping drinks in small flute glasses. Across the floor was a small annexed room lined with thin beams, some partially full of colorful coats. Across from the coats was a small bar and refreshment stand, as well as a sign for the restrooms.

“Excuse me, miss. Would you like assistance finding your seat?”

Zosia turned to see a young man in a crisp black uniform. The insignia of the theater was pinned to his chest pocket. Several others like him waited at attention around the lobby, ready to help guests with their coats, drinks, or whatever they needed.

“Yes, please.” Zosia glanced down at her ticket. “Could you point me to Section F, Row 13?”

He nodded. “It’s on the third floor. Would you care to take the lift, or...?”

“The stairs are fine,” Zosia replied.

“Right this way, then.” He held out a white-gloved hand towards the wide staircase on the far side of the lobby.

Following the directions from the attendant, Zosia climbed several flights of stairs and entered the theater hall. It was massive, with three tiers of seating perched one over the other like basins in a fountain. Small, private boxes lined the sweeping sides of the auditorium, most of them already bustling with activity. There was still plenty of time before the show began, but far below, the entire first floor was already packed with patrons. About half of the second floor was also occupied. It seemed that only the third floor, with its cheapest seats, waited for last-minute stragglers.

Zosia counted the rows and quickly found the spot that matched her ticket. She took the paper lying on the seat cushion—a small pamphlet had been placed on every seat in the hall. She flipped through it while she waited.

It hadn’t been mentioned on the poster, but the troupe performing ‘The Lady’s Gain’ was apparently all female. Zosia had seen the play once before in Lythenor, on a school trip long ago. She vaguely recalled the plot being about a noblewoman who refused her arranged marriage only to fall for her childhood nemesis, a dashing but mysterious prince.

Zosia tried not to roll her eyes. *Completely unrealistic.*

Still, the subject of the play wasn’t important. Zosia wasn’t here for entertainment.

She flipped the pages leisurely, scanning a list of names that meant nothing to her. On every other page was a message or advertisement from one of the show’s sponsors. She noticed a section for the mayor, followed by a larger advertisement for tickets to the Partyn Museum. The watercolor paintings of the Crown Jewels on display caused a small twist in her gut.

The trill of a trumpet echoed throughout the hall, heralding a shush across the crowd. Anyone who had been dawdling in the aisles scurried to their seats as the first few notes of the opening song began to play.

The moon crystals throughout the theater were simultaneously covered with cloth by attendants, plunging the hall into a dark anticipation. The red

curtains hiding the stage, hooked with thickly woven golden ropes, were swept to the sides by unseen hands.

A woman stood in center stage by herself. Sun crystal beacons similar to those used by the police force swiveled to frame her in their light, causing the marvelous ball gown she wore to sparkle. The details on her tight bodice were indiscernible to Zosia on the third floor, but it was intriguing how her skirts puffed out almost explosively in every direction as she moved across the stage. Her hair was an elaborate nest of golden curls—marking her as the play’s leading heroine, the Lady Kasandra.

The music shifted, and the woman began to sing. Her voice was sweet, following along dutifully with song lyrics that Zosia vaguely remembered. *She’s not a bad singer.*

Zosia shifted in her seat. Although the cushion had looked comfortable, it was actually quite stiff beneath her.

The music waned and the scene began to change—painted boards depicting the lady’s bedchambers and a few wheeled props were whizzed on stage by stagehands dressed in all black.

The next few scenes had Zosia’s attention waxing and waning along with the music that wove in and out of each musical number. She studied the stage and the comings and goings of the various cast and crew members, but couldn’t see any contraptions or wires from where she sat in the audience. On stage, a robust woman in a golden frolic playing the role of King Eddin showed Lady Kasandra her engagement ring before waltzing off stage. The Lady was left to bemoan her unwanted marriage, also through song, and Zosia’s mind drifted back to the exhibit at the museum. She would have to meet the chief in a few hours to prep for tonight’s stakeout. What should she suggest for ways to better protect the space?

She was wording and re-wording what to say to the chief when the violins that had been warbling along mournfully skittered—the notes suddenly sharp and elusive. The melody cut in and out, a distinct and alluring difference from the softer tunes of the previous numbers.

A palatable tension fell over the stage and, through it, the entire auditorium hall.

As the Lady Kasandra leaned dramatically over a piece of railing meant to symbolize an entire staircase, Zosia also found herself perking up. If she remembered correctly, this must be the scene where the prince arrived.

The violins lifted in a crescendo, and in their midst emerged the deeper, more sensual notes of a viola.

The lights flickered on stage. Out around the audience, attendants switched the heavy cloth covering the moon crystals with a colored fabric that drenched the auditorium in an indigo blue as deep as the night sky.

The stage lights, in contrast, brightened. The swarms of characters that had been mulling about on stage in their ball finery parted, stepping aside to reveal a figure in their midst.

Even from afar, Prince Alexandre was stunning. The actress playing him was dressed in a golden coat that flared into a swallowtail, with dark leggings clinging to her thighs. She turned in a sweeping movement, lifting her head to reveal the golden mask hiding the top half of her face.

Zosia felt her breath catch in her throat. Even from three levels up, leaning forward in her seat, Zosia was struck by a sense of familiarity.

The prince moved across the ballroom as if nothing could stand in his way. On stage, the actress's footfalls were simultaneously nonchalant and deathly precise. The prince swept a rose from within his jacket, holding it out—to Lady Kasandra in the scene, but also out towards the audience.

Their hands met, intertwined, and then the prince swept Lady Kasandra around the stage with ease. A long, pink ponytail swirled behind them as they waltzed with all the grace of royalty.

Zosia was perched on the edge of her seat; if she leaned forward any more, she would probably fall onto the lady sitting in front of her.

The scene changed and the story progressed, but Zosia was no longer following the details—she had eyes only for the sweeping form of Prince Alexandre, who moved with the sleek elegance of a cat and whose brilliant smile made her hands clench against the armrests.

As the prince fought against the antagonistic duke for Lady Kasandra's hand in marriage, the actress drew a thin rapier as if from nowhere, drawing gasps of admiration and excitement from the audience. The prince dashed and parried with the ease of someone who not only knew the steps by heart, but had the talent and skill to enact them with death-defying precision.

Though far away, Zosia could vividly imagine the sparkle in those masked eyes. It made the detective's stomach drop as if she were spiraling down to the first floor far below.

She sucked in a quiet breath through her teeth. It was undeniable—anyone who had seen what Zosia had seen the night before would be able to

figure it out. The similarities were flaunted in the open, beneath the beaming sun crystals and on display for hundreds, if not thousands, of people to see.

The thought made Zosia's stomach squeeze tighter.

In the climax of Act II, the prince clutched his lady's hand while looking out into the audience. The music was tense and romantic, instilling a doomed type of hope. Pressing an exaggerated kiss against the dark skin of Lady Kasandra's hand, the prince looked past her, out into the audience.

For one heart-stopping moment, Zosia felt as if those eyes locked onto her own.

"My Lady," the prince cried, voice carrying throughout the vast theater with ease. "I am yours, I swear it true. No duke shall keep you from me. Your only role is to be mine. So, I beseech you—*come to me.*"

This was the cue for Lady Kasandra to begin another song, something about the unpredictability of love, but Zosia tuned it out entirely; She was fixated on the prince's smiling face.

Zosia's collar was suddenly too hot—did the theater not have windows to open or fans of some sort? It felt like the prince was staring straight into her soul, even though she knew it was just a trick of the stage. With those glaring sun crystal lights, there was no way they would be able to see beyond the edge of the stage—was there?

The scene changed, granting a reprieve from the two leads to focus on the plotting of the nefarious duke. Things were left tense, the music tight and promising as the curtain began to close. Audience members clapped and whistled, already buzzing with thoughts on the performance so far and anticipation for the next act.

The curtain fell shut and the attendants quickly removed the coverings from the crystals within the theater. As light returned, Zosia glanced down. Her knuckles were white against the faded wood of her chair's armrests.

She stood up quickly. She had to get backstage.

The Grand Opera & Theater

Backstage

ZOSIA slipped out of her seat, mindfully navigating past the well-dressed couple sitting next to her. They didn't look like they intended to leave their seats during intermission. As she sucked in her chest and squeezed around their knees, Zosia kept her detective bag tucked close to her side. At another event, her uniform might have seemed out of place. Luckily, in the theater of elegant patrons, even here in the cheaper seats, her clean and well-maintained suit blended in nicely.

She exited the aisle and walked down the stairs. She had to step around a gentleman in a purple tuxedo who was quickly downing the two flute glasses he held in both of his gloved hands.

Zosia stepped off the last stair onto the polished marble of the lobby. She hadn't noticed it before, but around the side of the stairs was a small, unlabeled doorway. It was tucked away from the bustling comings and goings of the patrons. A security guard sat in a tall chair to the left of the doorway. He glanced up at Zosia lazily, then did a double-take as she continued to approach.

"Ma'am," he called to Zosia. "This is the wrong way. The restrooms are over there." He gestured toward the bar.

"Does this go backstage?" Zosia asked.

"Uh, yes," he replied.

"Then it's the right way," Zosia replied, reaching for her lapel.

"I'm afraid it's cast and crew only pas—oh." He stopped, eyeing Zosia's police badge with wide eyes. "I guess that's, uh, that'll get you in then, won't it? Right-o, in you go..."

The young guard waved her past, sitting up a bit straighter in his chair.

"Thank you." Zosia stepped through the small doorway.

Moon crystals were tucked into antique-looking holders along the wall, drenching the hallway in gentle light as Zosia descended. Unlike the lobby and halls where the patrons meandered, there was no decor here—the wallpaper had no paintings or theater paraphernalia on display. It looked

worn in the way well-traveled spaces did, the wooden floorboards of the hall softened beneath many years of hurrying slippers and ballet shoes.

The hallway turned sharply, likely to avoid the ground floor of the auditorium on the other side of the wall. Zosia stepped around the corner to find the path ahead curving into a wider area that was bustling with people. They scurried about their business, talking, practicing dance moves, or burning lines into their memories. Most of them were at least partially in costume, although Zosia passed one woman skidding into the open doorway labeled “makeup” in nothing more than tight shorts. No one spared a look at Zosia as she maneuvered quietly along the edges, careful not to get in anyone’s way.

Further down the hallway, someone yelled, “15 minutes to curtain!”. The call was followed by a frenzy as the actors and stagehands sped up whatever hurried tasks they were doing.

Zosia kept her head lowered while simultaneously trying to read the labels on the doors she passed. *‘Orchestra’*, *‘Townsfolk’*, *‘Kasandra’s ladies-in-waiting’*, *‘Duke’s regime’*, *‘Stage crew’* ...

Zosia had to flatten herself against the wall, squeezing behind a group who had broken into a dance sequence practice right in front of the exit onto the stage. She could see the back of the curtain over their bobbing heads as they spun around in pairs. Pulling away from the dancers, Zosia was relieved to find that the churning mass of bodies became less dense the further she went. There were only a few doors remaining as Zosia approached the end of the hall.

A partially open door with a paper flower stuck to the front caught her eye. *‘Lady Kasandra’* was written in elegant cursive across the pink petals. Zosia shot a curious glance inside, but nothing was visible behind stacks of frilly under-dresses and shawls hanging from on the door and racks within. Ribbons lay scattered across the floor, reaching like root tendrils into the hallway. Zosia stepped over them carefully.

Up ahead, there was only one door left. On the closed door was a large golden star tacked in the center, its pins pressing new holes into the already pincushioned wood. The words *‘Prince Alexandre’* had been inscribed upon the paper star in swirling, fanciful letters.

A few steps to the right of the door, the worn floorboards transformed into dark wood that disappeared behind a thick curtain. It matched the wood of the stage—meaning this must be a private entrance, separate from the

one used by the rest of the cast. Zosia could hear people hurrying around the stage beyond the curtain, and the staccato pluck of notes as the orchestra re-tuned their instruments out in the pit.

She took a deep breath, sparing a quick side-eye around. A few actors and stage hands hustled by, too flustered with their costume adjustments and their contraptions to look Zosia's way. Making absolutely sure no one was looking, she pulled her bag closer to her front and reached inside. Zosia found what she needed easily. The handcuffs were slipped into her pocket with no one the wiser.

This was it, then. She would either get what she was looking for or she'd have to leave empty-handed.

Straightening her back, Zosia knocked.

There was no reply.

Frowning, Zosia reached for the handle. The cold of the metal seeped through the thin bandage wrapped around her hand. It turned with an accommodating click.

Unlocked? They have their guard down... or could it be a trap?

Either way, there was no backing out now.

Zosia gathered herself and pushed against the door.

The Grand Opera & Theater

Dressing Room

THE ROOM inside was small and strikingly messy, although to be fair, it was more passable than the forest of skirts in Lady Kasandra's dressing room. Racks of jackets hung alongside shelves that spilled over with various props. Several long rapiers leaned against the left wall.

Despite the curious clutter, Zosia's attention was immediately drawn to the tall figure just a few paces away. The woman's back was turned as she leaned toward a large trio of mirrors atop a low dresser.

"Not ready, and it's not time yet!" the actress called. She didn't turn around. "I'll be on stage by curtain, as always."

Although she was wearing a different outfit than the one she had last worn on stage, it was undeniably the actress playing Prince Alexandre. The golden mask was gone and the prince's ball clothes had been replaced by a costume designed to appear casual but still befitting a prince—a tasseled jacket and tight black leggings with knee-high riding boots. She wore everything like it had been custom-made for her, and, Zosia imagined, it likely had been. Thinking of her standard uniform with its too-long sleeves, Zosia tried not to feel self-conscious.

She pulled the door behind her. The knob twisted with a discernible click as it shut.

The actress stilled at her dresser. Her eyes flicked up, meeting Zosia's gaze in the mirror. They were a brilliant green rimmed with dark coal that locked onto Zosia's own wintry blue. For the briefest flash of a moment, the actress' eyes widened. Zosia knew she had been recognized.

Silence hung heavy and tense like a curtain about to fall.

Slowly, the actress set down the container and brush she was holding, and replaced it among the many jars, bottles, and other vessels splayed across the dresser.

The air felt static and the room muffled, much like the hush of the audience right before the show began. It must have felt like a challenge to the actress, who couldn't resist striding into the spotlight.

“My, my,” she said, smiling into the mirror. “A visit from the police? What an honor.” The actress placed her elbow onto the dresser, lounging forward with the alert leisure of a cat on the hunt. “Are you a fan?”

Zosia considered her options. It wouldn’t hurt to play along and be civil—in fact, considering the amount of people just beyond the tight four walls of the dressing room, that was likely the safer option for all of them. For now. “Not quite.”

“Then what brings you to me?” The actress tipped her head to the side, her grin reflecting in the glass. “Has there been a murder?” She turned leisurely, a fluid movement that broke their connected gaze within the mirror.

As she faced Zosia, their eyes locked once again—reattached without a barrier in a way that left Zosia feeling somewhat vulnerable. There was an intensity about the other woman unlike anyone Zosia had ever met. It was like meeting a superstar in the flesh; someone who was so far beyond the mundane that they seemed otherworldly.

Under that strong gaze, Zosia suddenly found it hard to swallow. She grit her teeth to stay focused.

So, you’re pretending you don’t recognize me? Well, then.

“No, not a murder,” Zosia replied, keeping her gaze fixated on those cat-like eyes. “I’m here to investigate a heist.” *Two can play this game.* “I’d like to ask you a few questions”

The actress’s eyes widened—just a bit too much to be genuine. “Why of course, Detective! It’s my pleasure to serve. I am, after all, a law-abiding citizen.”

Like hell you are.

“Are you sure?” Zosia pressed. “How can I know you’re not just *acting*?”

“Well,” the woman paused, dipping her head to blink up at Zosia playfully. “Considering I’m performing a lead role here tonight, I’d say I am rather good at that.”

“You’re not on stage right now,” Zosia replied. She fought the urge to cross her arms. This woman was unpredictable—Zosia refused to let her guard down.

The actress grinned, her overdone innocence melting away in a heartbeat. In its place was a smirk that was downright illegal.

“On stage, off stage, it doesn’t matter.” She stood up languidly, the golden tassels on her prince’s jacket swaying with the motion. “I’m always

acting, aren't I? But..."

She took a small step towards Zosia. Like this, she was once again framed in the light, this time of the dresser mirrors. The resemblance to the thief at the crime scene was undeniable. "You would know all about that, wouldn't you... *Detective*?" The last word came out as a purr, the weight of it heavy against Zosia.

Zosia stiffened... deliberated... and then sighed. Ever so slowly, she allowed some of the tension to fall from her shoulders.

She leveled a calm stare against the actress.

"There," the other woman cooed, "that's it. As much as I adore the game, shall we speak honestly now?"

"Are the walls in here soundproof?" Zosia asked, staying rooted in place.

"Not by design," the actress started, "but it's intermission. An eight-horse carriage could stampede through that hallway and no one would notice."

"If you say so."

"I know so," the actress insisted. "We can speak plainly. From one criminal..." she dropped her gaze, giving Zosia a heavy look from beneath her long eyelashes. "...to another."

Zosia scoffed, but it would have been a waste of breath to disagree. She finally gave in to temptation and crossed her arms, shifting to a more relaxed stance. She leaned on one hip and sighed.

The actress clapped her hands once, delightedly. "Oh, I like this. And here I thought you never drop the act before the job is complete."

"I came because I had to," Zosia scolded, "so I need you to be serious, for once."

The actress stuck out her bottom lip as she slid one boot back and forth against the ground.

"Tytnia," Zosia scolded.

The actress—Tytnia—flashed an even brighter grin at the sound of her name. It lasted a heartbeat before it melted into a pout.

"Oh, but that's not fair," she whined. "You know my name, but I don't know yours this round. Do tell." She swept her arm in Zosia's direction. "What character are you playing this time, little detective?"

Zosia bit her lip, then acquiesced. "Zosia."

"Ahhh, *Zosia*." The name came out smooth on Tytnia's tongue, and she smiled as if she liked the feel of it in her mouth. Zosia found that the small dressing room was uncomfortably hot. "It suits you, much better than your

last alias. What was it again? Mila?" Tytania twisted a strand of pink hair mindlessly around a long finger, letting them fall piece by piece to land against her shoulder. "Still. I think I like your real name best of all, *Alici*—"

"Stop," Zosia cut her off. Tytania could flaunt around with whatever names and identities she wanted, but Zosia's real name would remain safely tucked away. She refused to risk getting it, and the family who had given it to her, involved here. She wouldn't even think of it until she was back in Lythenor. "You will call me Zosia."

Tytania watched Zosia for a long moment, then shrugged. "As you wish." She shifted, crossing one ankle over the other.

Zosia sighed. "Enough about the past. I came here to talk about the current heist. If we want this one to be as successful as the others, then you need to be more careful." Zosia pointed an accusatory finger at Tytania. "As requested by the Under, I've got a hand on the police from the inside, but that's all for nothing if someone recognizes you bouncing around on stage."

"Oh, but I *need* the theater!" Tytania exclaimed. "It keeps me in prime shape for thievery, debauchery, and... *other* fun things." She winked at Zosia.

Zosia ignored the insinuation entirely. "Police saw you at the crime scene last night. What if they're here, watching the show? You're not subtle. You're literally the main role."

"Praise me more," Tytania said with a cocky wave of her hand.

"What I'm saying is, you're getting sloppy."

Tytania mocked a gasp, clutching the front of her ruffled blouse. "Me? Sloppy? Never."

Fueled by frustration, Zosia stepped forward. She half expected the taller woman to step back, but instead, Tytania straightened up. She met Zosia in the dead middle of the cramped dressing room, standing so they were nearly early chest-to-chest.

Zosia glared up at Tytania, painfully aware of the height difference between them. It didn't matter—she needed to get her point across, or both of their necks would be on the line. If not at this mission, then surely on another one in the near future.

"Tell me," Zosia snapped, "Why did you take that scroll in Marzena? That mission was supposed to be just the Dire Crystal."

Tytania shrugged lightly, the tassels swishing as her shoulders shifted. "The Under sent in a late request. I obliged."

“Obliged!/? That little stunt jeopardized *this* mission. You can’t just do everything they tell you without thinking,” Zosia urged. If Tytania thought the Under cared about them—about any of their pieces on the board of the game they played—then she was stupider than Zosia gave her credit for. None of the higher ups cared about their underlings; not on this side of the law or the other.

“I don’t,” Tytania replied. “I do what *I* want to. And Lord Hinterton shouldn’t have left his silly little history collection out where it was so easy to grab.”

“Fine,” Zosia huffed. “Did the Under tell you to take the jewels from the Museum one at a time too?”

“No.” The smirk teased the edge of Tytania’s lips.

“Then why?”

“For the drama of it, Zosia!” Tytania exclaimed, throwing out an arm while the other clutched at her chest. She looked like she was ready to burst into song. “The anticipation of it all. Watching them scramble to prepare and then try to cover up the losses. It’s way more fun this way, admit it.”

Zosia felt her eye twitch. “Right, fun. Of course.” She narrowed her gaze further.

Tytania shrugged. “The Under hasn’t commented. They let me do what I want, so long as I get them what they ask for. But enough of this drudgery.” She tilted closer, her own eyes narrowing, almost in mockery of Zosia. “Did you come all this way just to tell me off?”

“Is it wrong for me to worry?” Zosia snapped back, vividly mindful of the mere inches between them. “They’re sending us on increasingly high-stakes missions. We don’t have room for error.”

“Then I’m happy to put your worries to rest. They are entirely unfounded—I’m the best of the best,” Tytania announced with a flourish of her hand. “A top-tier thief with flair, and an excellent escape artist to boot. Even if those idiots could put the pieces together and follow the trail back to me, I’d already be long gone.”

“Mhmhm.” Zosia frowned. Tytania was not getting the point. Standing like they were currently was also becoming a challenge. If Tytania leaned any closer, Zosia would either have to give in and step back or cross her eyes to keep the other woman in her line of sight.

Additionally, this close to Tytania, she could smell the other woman’s perfume much clearer than she had in the museum. Her senses were washed

over with a warm, alluring spice tinged with the faded notes of a hundred different perfumes and stage makeup. Lurking beneath it was the darker scent of mountain balsam. It was a unique and rather enticing combination.

“Oh, but forgive me,” Tytania said. She tossed her head, sending her long locks swirling and another wave of her perfume to accost Zosia. “I’m not being humble. I may steal the spotlight on stage and at the crime scene, but you, Zosia dear...”

Zosia couldn’t quite pin down the emotion she felt when Tytania called her a term of endearment, sarcastic or not. She didn’t have time to think on it, either.

“You’re quite the performer, too.” Tytania watched Zosia closely, the black eyeliner she wore a striking difference against the green of her eyes. Zosia found it hard to look elsewhere. “You know, those of us on stage are nothing without help from the shadows.”

“Funny,” Zosia quipped back. “I think that’s the most you’ve ever complimented me.”

“*Funny*, because I compliment you all the time. You just don’t notice.”

Zosia resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “If I’m your ‘help from shadows’, aren’t you going to ask for details about the police’s stakeout tonight?”

“Hmm? Why would I do that?”

“I’m literally on the inside of the police department. I could give you names, info about supplies, or people’s stations in and out of the museum. All the things that could make your side of the job easier.”

Tytania laughed, tipping her head back in a way that revealed the long curve of her neck. Zosia thought it looked terribly soft.

“But that would ruin the surprise!” Tytania said. “I like when they give me something to be excited about. Besides, handling the police is your job, isn’t it?”

Zosia grimaced. *She’s impossible.*

In the four heists they had found themselves paired up on so far, Tytania had not once reached out to Zosia for guidance. She had never asked for help, never wanted to cooperate on a plan. While the nature of their roles made it difficult to collaborate openly, there were ways to meet up in secret. It would make things easier for both of them, if only Tytania took this as more than some game or a splash of fame on her portfolio.

Zosia opened her mouth to vocalize this, but was startled by a sudden crash. She took a quick step back, instinctively putting distance between

herself and the most dangerous thing in the room—Tytania—despite the sound coming from through the wall. Despite the loud voices from the neighboring room, Zosia couldn't hear what was being said. Tytania had been right about about the chaos preventing eavesdroppers. It did sound rather like cussing, though.

Tytania didn't look phased in the slightest. She idly brushed at her nails as the raucous sounds from next door faded away.

"One reason I don't audition for princessy roles," she said under her breath. "Those skirts are a nightmare to get into."

Zosia dropped the hand that hovered over her baton. But she didn't let go of the tension that had locked into her body—this had been a clear reminder of where they were and what little time they had. Intermission was only 20 minutes and Zosia had lost track of how long she had been in the dressing room.

She was running out of time to get the message across.

"Tytania, seriously—"

Tytania cut her off as she wiggled a finger at Zosia. "And there you go again! Zosia, darling—you take this way too seriously." It sounded playful enough, but Zosia got the feeling Tytania was also aware of the seconds ticking by. "What's the point of a visit if it's not for fun? If you're just here to scold me, then you'd best go. I have another act to prepare for."

With a lingering look at Zosia, she turned around, stepping back to the dresser. Bottles clinked as she selected one from the messy assortment.

Zosia frowned. Dealing with Tytania was like trying to contain a hurricane or catch a shooting star, or perhaps both at the same time. But despite the ride of emotions and uncertainty that Zosia always felt when dealing with the other woman, she did not like being pushed aside. Also, she had come all this way and risked a visit to try and get Tytania to see how reckless she was being. All in hopes that the other woman would knock it off and, ideally, cooperate. It would be for nothing if she couldn't get the point through Tytania's spotlight-addled skull.

Some people only learned through demonstration.

Zosia took a few steps closer, stopping right behind Tytania. The actress didn't turn around, nor did she look up, focusing on unscrewing the sticky cap to one of her makeup jars as she ignored Zosia.

So cocky.

In one fluid, practiced motion, the handcuffs hidden in Zosia's jacket were out and over Tytania's wrist. The metal had clicked into place before Tytania could pull back her hand.

In the mirror, for one flashing moment, an expression flitted across Tytania's attractive face. Surprise? Fury? Something else? It passed so quickly that Zosia couldn't be sure.

Like a mask, Tytania's features in the mirror melted, settling into a coy, relaxed smile. "Aha," she breathed. She dropped the opened jar. It hit the dresser with a soft thud, the creamy liquid inside spilling onto the stained wood.

"Do I have your attention now?" Zosia whispered from behind her.

Tytania didn't move, her gaze fixated on the metal cuff around her wrist.

Zosia continued in a quiet but forceful whisper. "Then listen. Be. Careful. Not cocky, not overconfident. *Careful*. Otherwise," Zosia tugged the cuff gently for emphasize. The chain connecting them clinked ominously. "You'll end up in someone else's cuffs—and I might not be able to get you out."

"Detective Zosia," Tytania said, low and dark. It was a different tone than before, and one that put all of Zosia's senses on alert. "It almost sounds like you're jealous. Someone else? Catch me?"

She laughed, but this time it was deeper, almost breathy.

"How about this." Tytania's eyes flicked up to the mirror, meeting Zosia's once again. She shifted, the cuff chain going tight in Zosia's grip, but Zosia couldn't look away—not away from that gaze. Tytania's eyes were like green fire, too intense to ignore. If Zosia hadn't known better she would think that she was the one who was caught in the cuffs.

"I promise..." Tytania's eyelids lowered, her long lashes dark and striking against the stage power brushed on her cheeks. The makeup amplified the curves and shadows of her face. "You're the only one I'll let catch me. How about that?"

Zosia found that her mouth was suddenly dry. Was this what she wanted? Wasn't this why she had come? If so, why didn't she feel like she was winning here? On the contrary, Zosia felt like she had been lured in and caught, pinned in that show-stopping stare.

"Just—" Zosia pulled her gaze away, fixating on the ribbon holding Tytania's ponytail in place. "Just be more mindful. Your neck isn't the only one on the line here, so—"

Another click echoed in the room.

Zosia looked down. Somehow, the second cuff that had been in her hand was now locked firmly around her wrist. She was chained to Tytania.

“Wh—”

Pressure exploded in her arm as Zosia was yanked forward and then shoved. The slam of the dresser into her lower back knocked the wind from her lungs. There was the tinkling of glass and the slosh of liquid as most of the bottles on the dresser went flying.

Tytania loomed over Zosia as the shorter woman scrambled to regain herself. Zosia’s arm—still cuffed to Tytania’s—was squeezed between their bodies as she clutched for purchase behind her, the bandages on her hand sliding against the wood of the dresser.

Zosia’s mind was left to spin in space, unable to catch up to the twist in their positions and the warm pressure of Tytania’s lithe body pressing her against the dresser. She felt like one of the jars that had gone sailing to the floor, rolling around helplessly.

“I was trying to be nice,” Tytania said, shifting in a way that sent her hair brushing against Zosia’s cheek. With her mind still checked out, Zosia tipped her head back—perhaps to get away. Instead, it gave Tytania better access to Zosia’s neck.

“But since you threatened me, I’ll be frank—you’re the one who needs to be more careful, Detective. Coming here to see me? Risky. Careless, even.”

Each word Tytania breathed was a tangible pressure against Zosia’s sensitive skin, a caress by invisible fingers. Tension seeped through the air, thicker than the makeup creams melting onto the floor.

“One might think you had ulterior motives, darling.”

Pressed against the dresser with her back flat against the mirror and nowhere to go but further toward her captor, Zosia clenched her jaw. This was not how she had imagined this would go.

“I just—I take this job seriously,” Zosia hissed. It was meant to be forceful, but instead it came out as breathy and flustered as she felt.

“I believe that,” Tytania said easily. Zosia could hear the smirk in her words. “But now that I have this little theory of mine, I’d like to test it.”

Zosia froze, even as her heart thundered in her chest.

Tytania had always been flighty and flirtatious. Zosia had assumed that was just part of her flamboyant character. Whenever the other woman made

a sensual remark, Zosia had written it off as her playing around—acting, as she always seemed to be doing.

But now, with the other woman's breath teasing patterns below her chin, Zosia was no longer sure how to interpret Tytania's actions. Was this just a ploy to see how far Zosia bent? She wouldn't actually do anything, of course. Because she wasn't really interested in Zosia... right?

Zosia realized that, despite all of the time they had spent on opposite sides of the same operation, she didn't know much at all about her partner. She hadn't a clue about what—or who—the other woman liked, nor what Tytania would or wouldn't do.

Another warm puff of air against her neck made Zosia shudder.

"Tytania?" She asked, her voice stripped of confidence.

A strange thought squirmed in Zosia's mind that, all things considered, this wasn't that bad. In fact, Zosia's body was rapidly taking notes and trying to convince her that it was somewhat exciting—good, even. The dissonance between what her body was insisting and what her mind was demanding had her locked in place mentally, all while Tytania continued to keep her physically restrained.

"Present," Tytania breathed as she closed the inch between them. Her lips were searing hot against Zosia's neck.

Zosia pulled back slightly from surprise, only to remember she had nowhere to go. Even the clink of the cuffs was muffled, contained between the heat of their bodies.

"Tell me, Zosia." Tytania's tone was secretive. Zosia wanted very badly to be able to see her face, even if it was likely just a mask. "Why are you on this job?"

Zosia shut her eyes, the back of her head pressing into the mirror. Around them, the crystals embedded in the mirrors' edges continued their low, steady glow. The hum of the theater continued outside the dressing room. In Zosia's mind, there was a flash of a small house in the city, where an elderly woman slept in bed. Zosia shoved the thoughts away before they could fully form. "Protection."

"Hmmm. Noble," Tytania replied. "I was worried it was for the money. There's much more valuable things than cold, hard jewels or coins, you know. Money is so terribly boring."

Something other than lips brushed against Zosia's neck, and she realized it was a finger. The edge of Tytania's blunt nails sent pleasurable chills in

their wake.

Zosia couldn't restraint the shiver; nor the curiosity.

"W—" Zosia swallowed, her throat bobbing beneath the teasing touch of lips and fingers. "W-why are *you* on the job?"

"Oh, I thought that was obvious by now," Tytania purred, trailing down Zosia's neck. The sound was so deep, so close. "I like the excitement. The thrill. As for my reward, I take what I want. Jewels, scrolls, knickknacks—anything of interest in the vaults. Though it's kind of a waste, really. I prefer... warmer rewards."

The hum pressed against her clavicle caused Zosia's eyes to flutter. She had to strain to keep them open.

"And speaking of warm..." Tytania whispered, the words pulsing into Zosia's skin.

Unable to lean back further into the dresser and mirror, Zosia tried to brace against the wood again. Her other arm, still caught between them, tangled in Tytania's princely jacket. Zosia could feel the heat of Tytania's skin, flush beneath the thin fabric of the blouse.

Before Zosia knew it, there was a thigh pressing between her own. It was almost like they were stepping into a dance, but it was a routine that Tytania knew by heart and Zosia didn't know a single step. She twisted her grip in Tytania's jacket.

Tytania leaned back slightly, just enough to look down at Zosia from beneath lidded eyes. The grin on her lips could only be described as criminal. "Do you have any idea how hot you look in that uniform? It's tighter than the one in Marzena... I love how it presses against you, catching those curves. You were really something in the exhibit last night. I like it when you chase me, you know."

It was hard for Zosia to breathe; the temperature in the dressing room was spiking to dangerous levels. Tytania was so close. Each word from her lips was a hook that drew Zosia in deeper. She was right on the edge of letting go—of forgetting the show, and tossing aside their roles. Maybe this was just a game, but Zosia found that right now she no longer cared. How bad would it be, to give in to Tytania? Just this once...

A sudden, loud knock against the door sent Zosia's entire body locking up. A rush of ice chased down her spine as she came slamming back to reality.

Tytania paused, leaning over Zosia like a predator guarding their prey.

The knock repeated; it was definitely the door to their dressing room.

This is bad! Zosia's mind, although still sluggish beneath Tytania's touch and the unbelievability of the situation, came stumbling back to work. It whirled through possible escape plans. *We cannot get caught like this—we shouldn't be seen together at all!*

Tytania didn't appear bothered by the unexpected visitor. She withdrew a bit more, almost regretfully, from Zosia as she straightened to her full height. Her green eyes continued to pin the other woman down as she lifted a hand to leisurely twirl a strand of Zosia's black hair around her finger. *Tighter and tighter.*

"Ermina?" a rough voice sounded muffled through the door. "You in there?"

"Who's Ermina?" Zosia hissed.

"Everyone's allowed to have stage names, *Zosia*," Tytania whispered back. She called out, "Yes?"

"Intermission's almost over—you've got two minutes to curtain!"

"Thank you, Jerald. I'll be right there." Tytania's eyes didn't leave Zosia's. The strand of hair slipped from her fingers as she pulled back and untangled their legs. The cuff links clinked between them, the chain stretching out. Beneath the thick fabric of the police uniform, Zosia's arm suddenly felt inexplicably cold.

"Well, my partner in crime, it's been lovely. As it always is meeting you." Tytania extended her cuffed hand. "We'll have to pick this up again later."

Zosia grasped the metal chain. She tried to calm both her breathing and her heart rate as she worked at the small safety lever hidden inside the cuff.

"You'll be at the crime scene tonight...?" Tytania watched her leisurely, as if they had all the time in the world—as if an entire theater full of people weren't expecting her presence on stage in seconds.

"Yes," Zosia replied, hating how ragged her voice sounded. "Of course I'll be there. It's my job."

The cuffs snapped open.

"Good." With a dramatic flourish, Tytania slid her hand free and straightened out her jacket. The golden tassels swished energetically as she gave herself a quick look-over in the mirror behind Zosia. She smiled, clearly satisfied with what she saw.

Zosia, meanwhile, had a conundrum. It was just a few inches, yet the sudden gap between them was as liberating as it felt empty. She no longer

knew what she wanted.

“Ermina—60 seconds to curtain!” the muffled voice sounded anxious.

Tytania sighed dramatically. “Sorry, partner,” she breathed, and Zosia truly wanted to believe the apology in her eyes.

Tytania stepped toward the door, sending a wink in Zosia’s direction. There was still a small, sane part of Zosia that was grateful for the escape. The other, increasingly louder part of her bemoaned the loss.

“Tytania,” Zosia called softly, aware of the person outside. She didn’t move from the dresser. Her stupid knees were wobbly and she didn’t want Tytania to realize.

For a heartbeat, Zosia feared that Tytania wouldn’t stop—that she’d float off, through the door and back into the spotlight, without spending another glance Zosia’s way. It wasn’t an unfounded worry; games aside, they were only business partners, weren’t they? But for some reason it caused a spike of strange anxiety to bloom in Zosia’s chest.

Tytania stopped, glancing back over her shoulder. Zosia tried to ignore the seed of happiness that sprouted in her chest.

“Put on a good show,” Zosia said.

Tytania grinned back at Zosia, oozing confidence in the way that only she could. “I will. Though this is just a warm up. I look forward to our show together later tonight. Maybe you’ll catch me this time, hmm?”

She winked, flashing another one of those dizzying smiles.

Tytania grabbed the doorknob—only to yank her hand back.

The knob turned, twisted by someone on the other side.

Zosia’s heart stopped as Tytania stepped back, her expression flashing into something dangerous. The door creaked as it swung inward, revealing a man. He poked his head inside, the numerous lines on the dark skin of his forehead glistening with sweat. “Sorry, but we can’t wait any—oh.”

His eyes widened as he looked between the two women in the dressing room.

Zosia swallowed nervously. This was potentially quite bad. No one should see her with Tytania.

“Who’s she? Police?” The stress that looked permanently etched onto Jerald’s face deepened further.

“Nothing to worry about,” Tytania grinned. “Just getting a little good luck from my partner.”

Jerald's expression melted into relief. "Ah, that's alright. Didn't know you had a girlfriend, Ermina! Good for you."

"We're not—" Zosia started.

Tytania was back across the room in two steps.

She swept an arm around Zosia's lower back, and, as Zosia opened her mouth in surprise, Tytania swallowed her breath. Her mouth pressed chastely against Zosia's.

Tytania's lips were even softer than they appeared. The gentle press and heart-stopping warmth sent shocks chasing themselves up and down Zosia's body in a way that felt surprisingly pleasant.

Tytania pulled back, her lashes lowered. The smirk on her face, on the lips that had been on Zosia's mere seconds ago, was only visible to Zosia.

"See you later, love," Tytania said, loud enough for everyone in the hallway to hear.

Then, with another flirtatious wink, she strutted through the door, taking a sharp turn and vanishing out of sight.

Jerald tipped his head towards Zosia with an amused smile.

The door closed behind him.

Zosia fell back against the dresser. If her knees had been weak before, she couldn't even stand now.

What was that!? She—!

Her hands lifted to her lips. In the golden glow around the mirror, the bright red flushed across her face was starkly visible.

The tension was starting to seep out, and in its place was surprise—surprise at Tytania for actually kissing her, but also at herself for not hating it. On the contrary, her body was insisting very strongly that she had liked it. *A lot.*

Zosia shook her head, blaming it on the adrenaline. Being undercover, the stress of the heist—Tytania was just preying on the moment. It didn't seem too far out of her character to do so. And poor Zosia was out of her element, that was all. It had been, what, years since her last girlfriend? The intensity of her career path was stressful, not to mention the need to disappear after a job with a new name and new identity. Zosia was very out of practice when it came to things like flirting. That was the only reason Tytania was able to play her like an instrument; she was sure of it.

The kiss meant absolutely nothing. Tytania could play her games all she wanted so long as she played her part in their mission. Zosia's heart was not

a factor here. Moonlight forbid, Zosia wouldn't let that flirtatious thief get anything else from her; that kiss was the first and last thing she would steal from Zosia. Her heart would remain firmly her own, as it always had.

Zosia breathed in, slow and determined. The sound echoed slightly in the dressing room that now felt empty. It took several minutes for her heart rate to hesitantly settle back to normal, during which time she brushed down the front of her uniform until it could once again pass for professional.

When she felt like she had a hold on herself and her legs had recovered their dignity, she walked to the door and pressed an ear against the wood. Being backstage on her own wasn't all that risky in the grand scheme of things, but she had already been seen with Tytania by one person. It would be safest to make sure that no one else saw her anywhere near the actress or her quarters.

Outside, Zosia could hear the fading footsteps and voices growing distant as everyone's attention—both backstage and in the auditorium—returned to the stage.

She waited until the footsteps had faded and the distant sounds of the orchestra had begun to play before slipping out into the hallway.

The Grand Opera & Theater

Outside

THE LOBBY was mostly empty when Zosia stepped back into the dazzling light of the chandelier. A few patrons, clutching their drinks or last-minute snacks, were leaping up the staircase two stairs at a time or dashing over to the lift. There was still a small crowd outside the bathrooms. Those at the end of the line stomped their feet impatiently, sending longing glances back toward the auditorium.

“Intermission is over, ma’a—er, miss officer lady,” the security guard stationed at the mouth of the hallway called to her. “You ought to get back to your seat. You’re gonna miss the ending.”

Zosia lifted a hand toward the security guard. “Thank you, but I got what I needed,” she replied. “Goodnight.”

“Uh, okay. Goodnight, then.”

The music of the orchestra got quieter with each step. As she stepped into the chill of the night, Zosia repressed a shiver. Her visit to the theater had not gone as expected, but she had gotten Tytania’s promise. And something a little more.

She could still feel the tease of hot breath against her neck, and the warm press of lips against hers. A pleasurable chill ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the cool night air.

Zosia shook her head, refocusing on the mission. They had five of the six Crown Jewels that the Under wanted. She had a little time to prepare before all officers were due at the museum, so she decided she would go early to make sure everything was in line. Just as before, she would either destroy any clues Tytania left at the scene, or, even better, let the police ruin things themselves in their own poorly managed incompetence. It was almost funny how the Partyn Police managed to sabotage things all on their own. Between unmotivated officers and their chief who was more than ready for retirement, Zosia didn’t have to do much at all.

Still, she would do everything she could to finish this mission as quickly and efficiently as possible—especially seeing how Tytania was trying to do the opposite.

Zosia sighed, her warm breath mixing and vanishing into the evening air. It had stopped raining, but a bite lingered. Autumn was definitely on its way.

Where would she go after this? Zosia couldn't help but wonder. Or, more like, where would the Under send her next?

She would need to give a heartfelt and believable apology to the chief when she handed in her resignation. It was an act she had practiced and performed several times over the past few months. Perhaps Tytania was right, maybe she was a bit of actress after all.

The thought made her smile as she stepped around a large puddle. The streets were never empty here in the entertainment district, but it seemed like a majority of the locals were up at the theater tonight. They would be watching the second act of the show, as Tytania dazzled them all on stage.

Tytania... Zosia's hand was halfway to her lips when she pulled it back down to her side.

The other woman was no doubt on center stage again now. Zosia could have gone back to her seat, probably should have, to not waste the free ticket, but there was something holding her back. Maybe it was the risk of staying too close for too long to her undercover partner. Or maybe it was the fact that that the prince on stage already had a fair lady. There was something unappealing about watching Tytania strut around while holding another woman, even if it was just a performance.

A carriage clattered down the street, the horses' hooves splashing up water. Zosia put some distance between herself and road, changing course to walk beneath the awnings. Sun and moon crystals twinkled from above, sending ripples of light dancing across the puddles Zosia couldn't avoid.

I shouldn't think of her like this. I'm being ridiculous.

Theirs was a business relationship, and a dangerous one at that. Despite her rather provocative promise, Tytania was walking the fine line of overconfidence. Zosia couldn't afford to let anything happen to either of them. She was far too professional to let a silly kiss stolen by a thief cloud her judgment and jeopardize the mission. One of them, at least, needed to be responsible here.

Zosia fixed her jacket, pulling it close against the chill of the night. The moon hung, a smirk of a crescent in the sky, like a distant crystal that remained out of reach.

She walked until the cobblestones began to shift into smooth road. She passed the cafe, whose basement windows peeked above ground and spread an inviting light across the damp street. Resisting the urge for another warming cup of tea, Zosia hailed a carriage instead.

After she directed the driver to the museum, she sat back on the cushions with a content sigh.

Her trepidation from earlier this afternoon was gone, and she was filled with a sense of direction. She would finish this mission, head back to the Under in Lythenor, and finally be able to get her mother into that better care facility. Preferably the one not too far from the academy, where the view of the mountains was clear. Then, assuming Zosia had a bit of pocket change left to spare, perhaps she could request a small break. It might be nice to get away from it all for a while.

As the dark streets of Partyn passed outside the window, Zosia wondered what Tytania might think about a vacation. Perhaps, as co-workers, a little trip might help them get to know more about each other. All in the name of working better together in the future, of course.

Zosia ducked her head, breathing into her collar. If there was a smile on her face, why not?

This was all going quite well.

~ ACT III ~

The City of Partyn

Streets

“SHIT!” Zosia yelled, throwing the door open so hard it slammed into the side of the carriage.

She pushed Tytania inside, half-hoisting the taller woman up and into the coach box. Zosia’s hands came away wet, her pale skin and sodden bandages a frightening red beneath the harsh glare of the street lamps. Zosia didn’t stop to worry about it as she leapt into the carriage after the other woman, grasping at the door and yanking it closed behind them.

“Hey—” the driver started, opening the small window to scold his unexpected passengers, only to freeze at the sight of them. His eyes widened at their bloodied clothes, illuminated by the moon crystal dangling on a chain in the middle of the carriage box.

Zosia slammed her hands on both sides of the small window, cutting off his view of Tytania. “Drive!”

“Uh, where—?”

“Just DRIVE!” Zosia yelled.

The carriage boy disappeared for a moment and time froze for Zosia—until she heard the crack of the reins. Their carriage lurched down the street, leaving the museum and the cry of the alarm horns echoing behind them.

Zosia spared a look at Tytania, who was settling onto the opposite bench. Her mask was long gone, torn off at some point in the struggle. She was wearing a martial police uniform that she had, apparently, acquired the night before. The once-crisp material was torn at the shoulder and flecked with blood that was hopefully not her own.

Tytania studied her arm like one might observe a novel that had caught their eye in a bookstore. She held it out in front of her, eyeing the scarf wrapped tightly around the limb. The cream-colored fabric had turned a worrying dark. Despite this, Tytania didn’t look particularly perturbed, even as the carriage jolted and shook beneath them and the horns sounded too close for comfort. The little moon crystal swung frantically on its chain above them, causing shadows and light to chase each other around the tight space inside the carriage.

Tytania's seeming nonchalance for their nightmarish situation didn't do anything to ease Zosia's spinning mind. In fact, it only gave her something else to worry at. She wondered if the other woman might be faking her calm. Then again, even if she was, what did it matter?

Breathe, Zosia told herself, sucking in air. She took a precious moment to recollect her thoughts, sweeping across her mind like an arm scattering unnecessary paperwork from a desk. In the momentarily empty space, she scanned for a particular memory—recalling paperwork and documents too valuable to keep, even in code.

Finding what she needed, Zosia crouched on the bench, peering through the small window to the driver's bench. She called out to the driver and recited an address.

The driver didn't reply, but the carriage veered off the main road, clanking down a backstreet.

Zosia settled back into her seat with an anxious sigh. She chanced a look at Tytania.

The other woman, unfathomably, was smiling. She flashed her signature grin to Zosia even as she cradled her arm. "Well, that was exciting."

Zosia was dumbfounded. After a moment she hissed, "*Exciting?* Are you crazy!" She sucked in another breath, which did nothing to calm her thundering heartbeat. "I told you to be careful. That was the *opposite* of careful. It went horribly."

Horrible was the understatement of the night. The mayor himself had arrived at nightfall, with a battalion of his own personal guards in tow. They were nothing like the lackadaisical police force—the mayor's guard were trained mercenaries, prepared to kill. Zosia had tried to talk a way out of it, but Chief Ainsley had cowed easily, no doubt happy to hand the responsibility for the final jewel over to someone else.

In a mockery of last night, the positions had been the same—but there were no easy-going police officers in the exhibit when Tytania had arrived. Instead, she had been met with a vicious group of thugs who had been instructed to kill on sight. Zosia had snuck away from her position outside to try to find Tytania and warn her, but not having known the thief's plans for arrival or infiltration, the task had been impossible.

The pursuing ensemble could not have gone worse. Unable to find or get a message to Tytania, Zosia had smashed light crystals wherever she could, trying to cause a distraction. Tytania had arrived dressed as a member of the

police's martial guard, ready to blend in. To be fair, such a ruse likely would have worked on the police, but it was hopeless against the mayor's battalion in their armored plate and 'attack-first-ask-later' methodology.

The chaos hadn't been enough to prevent direct confrontation and it had quickly become them against the guards in the darkness of the museum. There had been fighting and no small amount of broken glass. The two of them had barely managed to escape—thanks to another dose of sleeping gas and the unlocked door in the East Wing.

Zosia sighed, pressing her forehead against the trembling window of the carriage. The cold felt good against her building headache, but did nothing to remedy their situation. The mission was a failure and now they were on the run. It was a complete nightmare.

Zosia flicked another glance over to Tytania. The thief had crossed her legs, lounging back against her seat—with that grin still firmly in place.

"Please tell me," Zosia groaned, "what you have to be happy about?"

"Contrary to what you may believe, Zosia," Tytania said, her voice light, "I actually think it went quite well."

Zosia could only blink at her. *So much for being eccentric, she's actually lost her mind.*

"Well, alright," Tytania glanced up as if thinking, then continued, "the finer details of the scene may have veered off track, sure, but where's the fun without a little improv?" She tapped a bloody finger against her chin playfully. "But all in all, I'd say the performance went well."

"*Well!?*" Zosia echoed, her voice rising. She closed her eyes, then tried again. She glared at Tytania as she hissed, "We both got outed. Even if I hadn't been seen running around with you by the mayor's personal guard, I disobeyed a direct order from the chief. And your arm is busted. How are you going to hold your sword? How are you going to perform?"

Tytania shrugged, nonchalantly. "It wasn't all waste. I had a dashing detective rescue me. That was new."

"They had explosives, Tytania!" Zosia cried, trying to get the severity of what happened across to the other woman. "If I hadn't intervened, you might have *died*, and..."

Zosia stopped, the words caught in her throat. *And I couldn't let that happen.*

In the moment, she had panicked. Overwhelmed with the idea that Tytania might not survive the heist, she had jumped right into the fray.

Danger aside, it had blown her cover as an undercover agent. Her career was ruined, and not only here in Partyn. She knew the police branches talked; they would definitely gossip about a turncoat within the force. It was no longer safe for her to pose as a detective anywhere on the continent of Glorin.

All of that hadn't mattered in the moment. Concerns for her own career and safety had vanished the second it looked like Tytania was in danger.

Zosia pressed her fingers to her forehead. She looked tiredly at Tytania. *This woman is going to be the death of both of us.*

Tytania returned her look coyly. "And?" she prodded, tilting her head slightly.

"And it was a complete failure," Zosia finished. *A failure of epic proportions, at that.* It wasn't only tonight's haul they had lost—with both the police and the mayor's battalion hot on their heels, they didn't have time to go back to the theater or wherever Tytania had been staying to get the rest of the crystals. Zosia didn't even suggest it; they needed to flee from Partyn and get to safety as quickly as possible.

She fell back against the seat. Yelling at Tytania had released a small bit of the tension built up inside of her. With it gone, Zosia felt like a curtain without a rod or string. There was little else to keep her from crumpling.

Tytania continued to smile, one finger tapping lightly against her leg.

Her lack of reply, especially when she so loved to talk, caused a flicker of doubt in Zosia's mind.

"It *was* a failure." Zosia blinked at her across the carriage. "Right?"

Tytania gave a little shrug. She shifted, laying her good arm over her injured one, to tap provocatively at the belt around her waist.

Zosia sat up. The belt looked empty. *She couldn't have.*

It had been so chaotic in the dark room—the sounds of explosives ringing, the yells of the thugs, people screaming, the shattering of glass... there would have been no time to locate and find the final jewel among the mess.

But the look on Tytania's face...

"You—"

The carriage jerked, causing Zosia's jaw to slam shut. Her teeth echoed painfully as the carriage proceeded to bump alarmingly. Sore and annoyed, Zosia peered through the window at rough dirt streets. These could only be the back roads of the workers district, one of the poorest parts of the city.

After a few minutes of painful jostling, the carriage slowed to a halt.

“Where are we?” Tytania asked lightly.

“Doesn’t matter,” Zosia replied, pushing the door open as she glanced up and down the road. A single lantern, long overdue for a change of crystal, flickered pitifully a hundred yards away. The rest of the street was dark but blissfully quiet.

Zosia held out a hand to help Tytania down. “We won’t be staying here long.”

A cough sounded from above them. The young carriage driver looked down with a frown, his hand outstretched.

“Of course,” Zosia said, reaching for her bag. “Here’s—”

Her hand closed around empty space. She stared blankly for a moment as she recalled the chaos in the dark. There was a hazy memory of throwing her baton, then using her bag to whack someone over the head. After that was a blur of light, noise, and panic.

Whatever had happened, the bag was long gone—along with her notes, tools, and money.

Damn it. Zosia’s mind began to scramble. *We have to—*

“Here you are. Plus a bit extra for your trouble.” Tytania drew a small pouch from inside her sleeve. The coins clinked as she counted them into the driver’s outstretched hand.

The boy—the little shit—bit one suspiciously. After a moment he nodded, pocketing the coins into his oversized coat. With one last judging look, he swung around in his seat. The carriage jostled away down the street.

“How much stuff do you have on you?” Zosia asked, eyeing Tytania. The woman’s clothes were slightly baggy, large enough for things to be hidden within, but a whole pouch? It must have been strapped on tightly to have survived the scramble.

“Enough. And then some.” Tytania smiled. “It’s a theater trick.”

Zosia found herself relaxing slightly, just enough to give a small smile back. Perhaps the other woman was a bit more prepared, in her own impulsive and unpredictable way, than Zosia gave her credit for.

“Well?” Tytania asked. “Where to next?”

“Wait a moment. Just to be sure.” Zosia shifted her weight back and forth impatiently until the carriage had turned the corner at the end of the street.

As soon as it had vanished into the dark, she grasped Tytania's good arm and pulled her down the alleyway to their right.

"Oh," Tytania gasped. "So rough! Dragging me into a dark alley like this, you're very forward, Zosia."

Zosia ignored her, too focused on counting the dirty windows pressed into the walls of the tight space. A cat peered curiously at them from a windowsill, watching them with round eyes as they passed.

Zosia stopped at the sixth window on the right. She reached up to tap against the dirty glass. Her knuckles rapped seven times against the dark window.

Tytania leaned forward. "What kind of—"

"Shhh, not so loud," Zosia hushed. She turned to Tytania with a raised eyebrow and whispered, "Did they not tell you about the backup plan?"

"Maybe they did," Tytania whispered back, standing on her tiptoes. With her height advantage, she would be able to see further than Zosia could. "But I must've tuned it out like I always do when an agent comes to visit. They take the haul, give me new instructions, and that's that. Boring stuff. Honestly never thought I'd need a backup plan."

Zosia rolled her eyes knowing Tytania couldn't see it in the dark. The sheer audacity of this woman, who thought she could waltz and dazzle her way out of any situation. She really was the opposite to Zosia, who liked to have things planned and staged carefully.

Still, Zosia couldn't deny that the confidence of the other woman was striking. She didn't dare tell Tytania that, though. The woman's ego was already bigger than the Grand Opera and Theater.

"That's why it's a *backup*," Zosia whispered. "For when things go wrong."

Tytania shifted closer to Zosia. Her next words were a warm gust against Zosia's air, chasing away the chill of the night.

"But that's why I have you," she whispered cheerfully, "to make it alright."

The creak of an opening door prevented Zosia from replying; she startled as the sound echoed through the night. The noise was followed by a small pool of light spilling into the alleyway. Somewhere in the darkness, the cat hissed disgruntledly.

A cloaked figure stepped into the alley, shutting the door quickly behind them. They clutched a lantern with a small moon jewel embedded inside. It

threw long shadows along the grimy walls.

Zosia took a hesitant step forward, only to be outpaced by Tytania. The taller woman placed herself firmly between Zosia and the approaching figure.

What is she thinking? Zosia was slightly startled at Tytania's positioning. *She's injured. Not to mention that we're not on stage—she's not a prince, and I'm not some helpless noblewoman.*

Beneath the thoughts was a sneaky warmth in her chest. While Zosia could only guess at the other woman's intentions, the action felt rather protective.

"Greetings from above," Zosia peered around Tytania's shoulder as she called to the figure. She was absolutely certain she had the address and the code right, but it was best to double-check.

After a tense moment, the figure replied. "And greetings from under." Their voice was gravelly and androgynous.

Zosia relaxed slightly. She stepped next to Tytania, who gave her a masked nod.

The figure pushed the light forward, putting their own face further in the shadows. "What can I do for you, friends?"

"We need an exit from Partyn." Zosia said, squinting against the light of the lantern.

The person pulled the light back toward themselves, brushing the shadows away to reveal a young face beneath their hood. Their brown eyes scanned them up and down, lingering on Tytania's arm. "I see that."

Tension hung in the air.

"Immediately," Zosia added, putting force on the word.

The figure pulled their gaze away from Tytania. "Very well. It was already arranged, just in case. You'll need this."

They reached beneath their cloak, fumbling for a moment in their pockets. The light made it hard to tell, but it almost looked like their pants were inside out. Perhaps they had been thrown on in a hurry—which made sense, considering the late hour of their unexpected guests.

"This will get you to the coast. I know a driver who transports... discreet cargo."

Zosia accepted a small pouch with a nod. She tugged its drawstrings open quickly, eyeing the modest pile of coins—enough for passage—and two slips of paper that were likely tickets.

“Did you complete the mission?”

Zosia looked up from the pouch. “We’ll report the mission status directly to the Under,” she said, her gaze firm. She reached down to open her bag, only to be reminded yet again that it was missing. “You said you had a contact?”

“Uh, yes,” the figure said, slightly cowed. “Follow me.”

Their assistant walked around them, keeping a mindful distance as they headed further down the alley. Zosia nodded to Tytania, who shrugged amicably in reply.

As they walked, Zosia tucked the pouch securely inside her jacket. Losing her bag wasn’t a fatal error—not with her notes in a personal code—but it was an unfortunate loss. She had collected her tools carefully over her years at school, and some of them had been graduation gifts from Minthol’s Academy. She would have to go without for a while. Hopefully the token money in the emergency pouch would be enough to get them a bit further than far away from Partyn.

The alley intersected with a wider road, indiscernible from the street they had arrived on. A few tall lamps hunched over the wide road, but only every other one had a crystal inside. The road was a splotchy patchwork of dull light and shadow.

Their guide whistled once, sharply.

Zosia remained tense, staring down the street, but no one emerged.

Their guide whistled again.

Tytania scuffed her boots absentmindedly, rubbing against pebbles in the dirt, causing one to dislodge. She kicked it further into the road, where it clunked loudly against another stone.

Zosia gave her an annoyed nudge with her shoulder. Tytania pushed back, immediately wincing at her arm.

“Strange,” their guide said, and Zosia straightened up, half expecting a reprimand for their childish behavior, when the guide leaned further into the road. “She’s usually prompt. Although she’s got a reputation for being a bit —”

Zosia didn’t have time to wonder who ‘she’ was as the jangle of tack and the bump of carriage wheels sounded in the dark. Two horses emerged around the corner at the far end of the road, pulling a midnight black carriage behind them. The horses and their sleek ride came to a stop a few feet away.

A woman sat in the driver's seat, dressed in all black to match her vehicle. A rimmed cap sat heavily over her cropped brown hair. Even in the dark, Zosia could feel her glare.

"You called?" she said to their cloaked guide, a bit too loud for Zosia's comfort.

"It's time for you to repay a favor. *Understand?*" The emphasis on the first part of the word was not subtle at all, leading Zosia to briefly wonder how their organization selected its agents. She had assumed her diploma had spoken for her intelligence and discretion, but perhaps the Under took recruits without vetting them for subtlety.

A glance at Tytania, who was standing on her tiptoes as she peered into the carriage with open excitement on her face, further solidified that thought. Zosia resisted the urge to sigh.

"Whatever, just get in." The driver gave them a brisk wave towards the carriage.

Zosia eyed the cranky woman and her carriage with trepidation. There was not an ounce of hospitality about the woman, despite her luxurious carriage. Putting their fate in the hands of such a grumpy stranger was not Zosia's first choice, but it was currently their best option.

Their cloaked assistant leaned slightly toward Zosia, as if sensing her unease. "It'll be alright. She'll see you out of here safely."

Zosia sighed. With no other choice, she nodded a thank you to their assistant and opened the door to the carriage. Zosia turned to Tytania, only to find the taller woman right in front of her.

Tytania grasped Zosia's hand. "How exciting! We're going for a joyride." She wove her fingers with Zosia's and, to Zosia's surprise, led her toward the open carriage. "Detectives first."

Too tired to argue and more than ready to put some distance between them and Partyn, Zosia stepped up into the vehicle. Tytania swooped in behind her, closing the door gently behind them.

The window to the driver's seat opened and something whizzed into the carriage. It landed in Tytania's lap.

"I don't care who you work for." The driver called. "But don't get blood on my seats."

Tytania held up the box curiously. In the light from the lamps outside, Zosia could see a medical symbol engraved on the box. *Bandages*.

“What about other fluids?” Tytania called back, tilting forward in her seat to peer through the small space to the driver’s seat.

Zosia reached across the carriage to gently shove her. Tytania clearly didn’t understand the predicament they were in. They could joke once they were far away from here.

Tytania, expecting it this time, bent quickly out of reach with a cocky grin.

At the icy silence from the driver, Zosia assured her, “We’ll behave. Please, let’s just go.”

With a gruff noise, their driver slammed the little window shut. A moment later, the horses tugged the carriage into motion and they were trotting into the darkness.

The Countryside

“I THINK we can open the curtains now,” Tytania said as she leaned forward with her elbows on her knees. Her arm was freshly wrapped in bandages. She had been lucky; the slash on her arm had been long but shallow. As long as she kept it clean, it should be fine to heal on its own.

Zosia hummed, lifting the bottom edge of the curtain to peer into the night. A few lights speckled the darkness, likely small cottages or farmhouses on the outer edge of the suburbs. Partyn was a heady glow in the distance. Beneath the bump of the carriage, Zosia sometimes thought she could hear the horns of the police force, but at this point she knew it was just the echoes of her anxiety.

“Well?” Tytania reached out with her good arm to brush at Zosia’s leg.

Zosia dropped the edge of the curtain, startled by the touch. Even through the fabric of her pants, the other woman always felt so warm.

Tytania raised an eyebrow. “You can relax now. Or what, do you think that chief of yours would chase us all the way out here?”

From what Zosia had seen of Chief Ainsley in her short time undercover in the Partyn Police Department, it was clear that the chief didn’t care what happened to the crystals. Assuming the tired woman had enough cigarettes to get her through the mayor’s tantrum, she would probably be pleased that the spectacle she had been forced to handle against her will was finally over. Zosia could picture the chief now, reclining in her messy office while she ordered Angela to write up her resignation papers.

It wasn’t just the chief, either. Although Zosia hadn’t been there long, she had gotten the distinct impression that most people in the Partyn Police Department prioritized their pleasures over their jobs.

“No,” Zosia answered truthfully. “I don’t think so.”

If anyone took the loss of the crystals to heart, it would be the mayor. He was probably cursing them and the police department to the celestial heavens and back. At the same time, Zosia reasoned, he had a working cover up already in place. The public had yet to find out that the crystals on display at the museum were replacements. If he kept pouring his money into making sure word didn’t get out, there was nothing preventing the

noble from continuing to use the flashy exhibit as a show of his power. His efforts would be better spent in Partyn than on chasing two fugitives across the sea.

“Alright,” Zosia acquiesced. “Open them.”

Tytania tossed the curtains to the sides, pressing her face against the glass to stare at the fading lights of the city in the distance.

Not wanting to be caught staring, Zosia peeked at Tytania from the corner of her eye. The four moon crystals placed in the corners of the carriage roof cast a soft glow over the other woman’s features. Her face appeared relaxed, so perhaps it was the somber light that made her seem somewhat sad as she stared out into the night.

“You’re going to miss the rest of your performances,” Zosia realized out loud. In all the chaos, it hadn’t occurred to her until this moment. Neither of them could go back to Partyn. Maybe it was a ridiculous of her—and Zosia still thought it was risky for Tytania to have been involved with a second job while on a mission—but she couldn’t help but feel bad for the other woman. It was clear how much Tytania loved the theater.

“Yeah,” Tytania mused, still looking out the window. “But it’s alright.”

“...Really?”

“They have a standby.” Tytania said, but it lacked her usual luster. “A terribly grabby woman. I think she tried to poison my water a few times. She’ll be thrilled I’m gone, to be honest.”

Something crossed over Tytania’s face, like a shadow passing across a light. Then it was gone. She sat back with a stretch, melting into the cushion with a long sigh.

Zosia was curious, but she also didn’t want to force Tytania to talk about a sad situation she couldn’t fix. Besides, they were co-workers, but were they even friends? They had certainly been through a lot together—including a kiss that Zosia was trying not to think about—but were they at a point where they could ask about personal matters, or would that be overstepping?

Stuck in her internal debate, Zosia crossed and uncrossed her legs.

Minutes passed in soft silence. The cushions were comfortable and most of the adrenaline had seeped out of Zosia’s veins. But her mind swirled with possibilities, what-ifs, and conflicting thoughts of the woman across from her. It seemed that, once again, sleep was beyond her grasp.

Outside, the carriage rustled along the path through the darkness.

Every now and then, Zosia glanced over at Tytania. The other woman looked at ease, but her gaze was set fixedly out the window. Like Zosia, she also looked lost in her own thoughts.

When the quiet became too much, Zosia sat up.

“So,” she said, her voice sounding a bit too loud to her own ears. She coughed lightly into her fist. Murky relationship thoughts aside, there was something else on her mind that she hadn’t gotten an answer to. Now seemed as good a time as any to bring it up. “Back in Partyn, when we were leaving the museum, you mentioned something but didn’t have a chance to finish. What happened to...” she dropped her voice to a whisper, mindful of the carriage driver on the other side of wall. It was unlikely that she could hear anything, but still. “...you know?”

“I know?” Tytania cocked her head.

Oh for the love of—

Zosia gave her a pointed look. There was a high possibility that Tytania’s comments as they had escaped the museum had been nothing but cocky nonsense, a tease fueled by adrenaline in the moment. Zosia was hesitant to entertain hope on such a slim chance.

“Ah, *that*,” Tytania said, snapping her fingers. “Yes.”

Zosia waited.

Tytania smiled, her crossed leg bouncing along with the movement of the carriage.

“Yes, what?” Zosia pressed.

“Yes to your inquiry.”

Zosia’s heart squeezed. “You didn’t.”

“I did.”

Zosia sucked in her breath. If Tytania had somehow stashed away even just one of the crystals, it would turn their complete failure into something salvageable. Maybe there was some hope for them after all.

“Show me.”

“With pleasure,” Tytania grinned, then lifted her shirt.

The breath Zosia had just taken in got wedged in her throat. Beneath the blood-spattered hem of the stolen militia jacket, Tytania was wearing a waist corset. The bottom of the tight garment appeared to be sewn directly to the trousers she had on. The corset strings were laced tightly, pulling the boned material to gracefully accentuate Tytania’s waist. Above the intricate laces peeked a sliver of creamy skin.

“What are you doing?” Zosia asked. There was a horrid little waver in her voice that she tried to swallow away.

Tytania winked at her, then started tugging at the laces. She winced as she moved her injured arm too quickly, then tried to readjust by holding the jacket up beneath her chin so her other arm could work at the strings. Doing so revealed a further stretch of her stomach along with the lower curve of her breasts peeking out beneath the lifted jacket.

No bra. Gods.

Zosia suddenly wished the crystals in the carriage weren’t so bright. At least then she wouldn’t have the sinful image of Tytania with her shirt up emblazoned into her mind. Nor would she have to worry about the other woman seeing the blush that was definitely spreading across Zosia’s cheeks.

“Just a moment,” Tytania said as her good hand stumbled with the ties, trying to keep her arm straight. She didn’t seem to be making much progress. Perhaps it was more difficult than it looked.

Zosia watched nervously.

“Do you want... umm...” Zosia trailed off, gesturing vaguely at Tytania’s clothes. That the other woman was untying. To take off. *Shit.*

“Oh, how sweet of you. That would be lovely,” Tytania’s smile was way too bright.

Zosia had the sudden treacherous thought that maybe the actress had been faking her difficulties.

She wouldn’t— Zosia eyed that grin. *No, she would. She absolutely would.*

Still, it was too late to back out now that Zosia had offered.

Zosia rose hesitantly, not only because of the jerky movements of the carriage on the uneven countryside roads, but also because she felt like she was crossing into the den of an unpredictable and hungry beast.

She settled warily on the bench next to Tytania. The seat was meant for two, but it was still a bit of a squeeze. Their thighs pressed together warmly.

Tytania watched her, and although the other woman’s features were neutral, Zosia could have sworn there was a spark of glee in her eyes.

“I’ll just, uh,” Zosia reached out, pulled her hand back slightly, then, gathering her confidence, reached for the laces on Tytania’s corset.

The string was warm in her fingers. Zosia tried her best, undoing knots and tugging at the stubborn laces to loosen them one by one. The corset was

slowly easing open beneath Zosia's administrations, but Zosia felt sure her heart was going to squeeze up through her throat before she could finish.

What is this? Am I seriously undressing Tytania right now?

Zosia swallowed and almost dropped the string, clutching it at the last moment. She was feeling rather lightheaded, and the fuzzy feeling was only increasing with each new hint of Tytania's toned stomach that was revealed. How much did the other woman work out? Were these abs a theater thing too? *No—better to not think about Tytania's body right now.* It felt much safer to focus on how sweltering it was in the carriage. The tight space was way hotter than it ought to be, which was ridiculous considering the chilly temperatures at night during this time of the year. Unless, it wasn't the climate that was causing Zosia to sweat. The thought was a startling one.

She suddenly became aware of Tytania's heavy gaze on her.

"I'll just—" Zosia moved to pull her hands back, but they were snatched by Tytania.

Zosia looked at Tytania's traitorous hands wrapped easily around her own. *So much for having a hard time with the laces...!*

"And here I thought you wanted to see the crystals," Tytania said coyly. "Change your mind?"

Zosia kept her gaze pinned down. The other woman's hands were larger, her fingers long. One of her pointer fingers curved around, the pad pressing into Zosia's pulse at her wrist. Zosia could only pray her heartbeat wouldn't give away her rapidly devolving thoughts.

She swallowed. This was not the time for Tytania's flirting games! Not only because Zosia genuinely did need to know the status of the crystals; she had also come to learn the hard way that she couldn't keep up with the other woman's games. Tytania always came away the victor, leaving Zosia behind and breathless.

"Stop playing with me," Zosia said, forcing her voice to stay neutral and aloof, regardless of the tango her heart was dancing. "Do you have them or not?"

"You'll find out," Tytania remarked, "or you won't. But I'm not giving away the surprise. If you want to know, you'll have to play along. That's how it works."

Zosia glared up at her. Pressed thigh-to-thigh, with Tytania keeping Zosia locked in place with the grip on her hands, they were as close as they had been in the dressing room.

The memory of Tytania's lips against hers pushed its way unbidden into Zosia's mind. It was a difficult thought to dislodge.

"Fine," Zosia hissed. "If you want it so badly..." She shook off Tytania's grip and, perhaps a bit more forcefully than she meant to, grabbed the partially-undone flaps of the corset wrapped around Tytania's waist. Doing so pulled Tytania towards Zosia, which simultaneously drew a low sound from Tytania's mouth. Perhaps it was just a startled noise, Zosia reasoned hurriedly, but it sounded right on the very dangerous border of being a moan.

That thought cut Zosia off for a second, her thoughts flickering like a dying crystal. Her useless brain supplied the idea that it had been a very nice sound.

She wouldn't mind hearing it again, actually.

Tytania blinked down at Zosia innocently as she shifted her hips in a not-at-all innocent way. The fabric of her corset pulled taut in Zosia's hands. "Well? Continue."

Zosia's fingers stumbled over the last strings. The corset was finally loose enough that it could be shifted. Zosia tugged it down until it rested on the curve of hips, revealing the tight lines of Tytania's stomach in full.

Zosia had to use all of her self-restraint not to stare at the dip of her hip bones, or—*oh, moonlight*—the soft-looking trail of hair that traced a path from Tytania's midriff down into the dark fabric of her underclothes.

It took an embarrassingly long second for Zosia to remember what she was supposed to be looking for. Once her mind skidded back to the actual task she had set out on, she spotted it—the corner of a small leather pouch pressed flush behind the curve of Tytania's hip.

"Go on," Tytania said, her voice a purr. Zosia didn't dare look up. She could practically feel the gloat emanating from the woman. Whether it was from successfully keeping the crystals that were supposedly in the pouch or from getting Zosia to undress her in the back of a carriage, Zosia couldn't be sure. *Probably both.*

Zosia reached out. Beneath her fingers, the leather was as hot as skin. It must have been squished into the corset and been pressing against Tytania's lower back this whole time. It wasn't entirely flat, either; as Zosia's fingers brushed against the heated leather, she could feel several bumps—small, acorn sized shapes. *The crystals.*

“Tyrania,” Zosia whispered, something stuck in her throat. *Having these changes everything.* “You really...”

She looked up, and found her nose brushing against Tyrania’s.

When had she leaned in? Zosia had been so preoccupied with the strings and the skin and the discovery of the crystals that she had pressed even closer to the other woman.

Excitement was thrumming through Zosia’s body. It was still so dratted hot in the carriage. Like the intoxicating sleep gas, all Zosia could smell was Tyrania—the spice, the mountain air, the hint of sweat, all mixing with her heat and the rush of adrenaline that was pumping through Zosia’s veins.

She was completely struck by the other woman. They were squeezed thigh-to-thigh in the back of a dim carriage, rolling through the hills of the nameless countryside, and yet Zosia felt like she was seeing Tyrania back on center stage, framed in the spotlight and heralded by cheers from the masses. Did she preemptively bring the crystals with her to the crime scene tonight? A stupid, risky move, if so—but yet it had changed their failure into a partial success. Even if they didn’t have the final crystal, the others should be more than enough to satisfy the Under. Not only did they no longer have to worry about any potential punishment from the shady criminal group, they would get their mission payment. Zosia would have enough money for her mom’s medical expenses and then some. She might even get that vacation she had been dreaming about after all.

Zosia’s tired mind and body were no match for the waves of emotions barreling through her. She felt like she was about to ascend to the skies. She was so happy, she felt she could kiss someone.

It was just situational, then, that Tyrania happened to be the closest person.

Lips met lips in a soft press as Zosia kissed Tyrania. It lasted for a single heartbeat—then the elation charging through Zosia’s body was tempered by shock at her own actions.

What am I doing!?

Zosia pulled back, her eyes wide and fingers flying to her lips. Sure, she was going on two nights of no sleep, but being tired wasn’t an excuse to lose self control like this. “Sorr—”

The word was cut cleanly from her mouth as Tyrania pressed forward, recapturing Zosia’s lips with her own.

Zosia melted into her.

Her chest was tight with the scramble of emotions vying for attention, but rather than try to sort through the ecstasy, guilt, delight, desire, and whatever else was swarming, Zosia pushed them all aside. Tytania clearly didn't mind. On the contrary, as the other woman shifted eagerly into the kiss, it was obvious that she was quite pleased with what they were doing.

The idea that this was just another part of their games bubbled up in Zosia's head, but she swatted it away with all the other thoughts she didn't want to entertain right now. If this was a game, she no longer cared. The stress of this mission had kept her on a razor's edge, but it was done—far behind them, left in the tracks of the carriage and the searchlights that were no doubt still flashing through Partyn.

Their mission to get the jewels was over and they likely wouldn't be sent on another mission anytime soon, so what did that make Zosia and Tytania now? Co-workers? Friends? Something else?

Perhaps the question wasn't so much what they were, but rather, what they could be.

Zosia found she didn't have any strong reason to not give in to Tytania. Besides, although it had been pushed along by a rush of adrenaline, hadn't it been Zosia to initiate the kiss in the first place?

Tytania sighed into her mouth and Zosia devoured the sound. The angle suddenly wasn't right—they weren't close enough. Zosia wanted, *needed* more. The kiss in the dressing room had been so fleeting that Zosia hadn't had the chance to enjoy it. This was different. With every press forward, every slide of warm lips together, Zosia felt the rest of her fading away, like clouds of worry dispersing in sunlight. It left her open and vulnerable, but also desperately craving more.

Zosia moaned lowly, pressing back. Tytania shifted, angling her head so they fit together even better. This new position helped immensely in Zosia's goal to get closer, and Zosia sighed against Tytania's mouth—but it still wasn't enough.

The carriage jumped, likely a wheel hitting a rock, and it jerked the last of Zosia's inhibitions away with it. When Tytania gripped Zosia's thigh, her blunt nails digging in, Zosia caved. She broke the kiss so she could swing one leg over Tytania.

With one knee pressing into the bench on either side, Zosia perched over Tytania's lap. Beneath and between her splayed legs, Tytania looked like a

present that was already partially unwrapped, her corset wrenched open and her jacked lifted to reveal her bare stomach.

Zosia couldn't believe it was happening, but she certainly didn't want to stop now.

Tytania trailed her fingers up Zosia's sides, sending shivers in their wake. She looked up at Zosia with hungry eyes, opening her mouth to say something, but Zosia beat her to it—capturing her already kiss-flushed lips in another embrace.

Mouth preoccupied and unable to talk, Tytania used her fingers instead. She slid them lower to press and tease around Zosia's hip. Her touch dragged forward. Fingers slipped under the front hem of Zosia's shirt to press temptingly at the sensitive skin there.

Zosia gasped at the feeling, shifting her hips slightly to give Tytania better access. She had no idea when the other woman had done it, but the button on Zosia's trousers was open.

Tytania, smirking into their kiss, continued to dip her fingers lower, teasing flushed skin.

Zosia could only moan, her shoulders losing their strength as she leaned forward into Tytania, pushing for more of the woman's touch.

A sharp knock on the front wall sent Zosia jumping an inch off Tytania's lap. Tytania's grip latched onto her hips and held her in place in a move that might have been protective, possessive, or both.

The window to the driver's seat slammed open. It was too dark to see through, but a very disgruntled voice yelled in, "What did I fucking tell you two? Last chance to behave yourselves or I'm leaving you here in the woods."

The window slammed shut. The grumbling continued outside, muffled, but undeniably pissed.

"Someone's jealous," Tytania murmured. She smiled up at Zosia, her gaze still heated. "Now, where were we...?"

She trailed a hand up and down Zosia's side, the implication heavy.

"We can't," Zosia said, pushing against Tytania's chest. She could only imagine the color her face must be right now. It would be a lie to say the offer to give back in to Tytania wasn't tempting, but they couldn't lose their ride. Even if Zosia's hunch was right and they weren't being urgently pursued, walking all the way to the nearest international harbor would be an exhausting chore.

Refusing to meet Tytania's sultry gaze, Zosia wiggled out of her grasp and collapsed onto the other bench. She straightened her clothes and redid the button on her pants, her fingers still trembling slightly.

The heat of the moment had cooled significantly. Now, without Tytania-fueled lust clouding her thoughts, Zosia was left rather embarrassed with herself. It wasn't like her to give into adrenaline and jump into something so reckless so easily, yet Tytania had caused her to do it twice, all in the same night. What was this woman becoming to her?

Zosia shook her head, avoiding both the deep thought and the temptation from Tytania, who was still wiggling her brows suggestively at Zosia from across the carriage.

Zosia pressed her hands against her forehead. She took a slow breath as she pulled the strands of hair clinging to her temples back into their proper place.

They had been talking about something important, hadn't they? Zosia glanced down and spotted the pouch. It had fallen off in their... activities, and now lay wedged between the seat cushions.

Right. The crystals.

That had been quite the distraction from something that was very important. It occurred to Zosia that there was a possibility that Tytania had seduced her in order to evade the conversation about the crystals. It was not an appealing thought.

Zosia narrowed her eyes at Tytania, aware that she couldn't look intimidating when she was as disheveled as she was. "You distracted me."

"You weren't complaining." Tytania shrugged. She leaned forward, resting an elbow on her knee to hold up her chin as she watched Zosia. She trailed a finger teasingly at Zosia's leg.

Zosia brushed the hand away, firmly ignoring the spark in her chest at the touch. She held out her own hand, palm up. The request was clear.

Tytania sighed. Her kiss-swollen lip stuck out in a pout. But after a moment she snatched the pouch next to her and, with no fanfare at all, tossed it over like it was a piece of unwanted trash; as if it didn't contain priceless gems that determined their fate.

Zosia caught the pouch with a frown. The leather had cooled, which felt strangely like a loss. Still, it was bumpy with treasures inside. She yanked the flap back.

The pouch was longer than it was wide, and Zosia had to shake it to dislodge the cargo inside. After a firm rustle, the moon crystals above illuminated the far more expensive crystals hiding in the pouch.

Zosia sank back into her cushion in relief. Seeing them with her own eyes had dispelled the last dredges of worry.

We really have them. We did it.

On the other side of the carriage, Tytania sat with her arms crossed. She was smirking, but her eyes were tight at the edges. She looked almost disappointed.

“There you go,” she said. “Your crystals.”

Unable to resist, Zosia dug one out. The stone was small, but the bottom had been carved to a slight point. Even with the leather pouch as a barrier, it couldn’t have been comfortable for Tytania to have them pressed against her for so many hours. Yet the other woman hadn’t complained once.

Zosia lifted the gem carefully, holding it firmly in case the carriage hit another bump. It was even more beautiful than it had appeared in the museum. As Zosia turned it in the dim light, vibrant colors pulsed within the galaxy crystal, as distant and mesmerizing as the night sky over the mountains of northern Lythenor.

Zosia cupped the priceless stone, then carefully shook out the others from the pouch. “One, two, three, four, five.... six.”

The final crystal fell delicately into her palm. The sixth crystal—the one that cost them their positions. How and when the other woman had managed to snatch the final gem in the chaos tonight and get it into the pouch was beyond Zosia. That cursed corset must either have a trick, or Tytania was even better at maneuvering her clothing and numerous secret pouches than she let on.

“Well?” Tytania leaned forward, a hopeful look twinkling in her eyes. “Did I impress you enough for another kiss?”

Zosia scoffed, but it lacked any bite. She refocused on the jewels in her hands. They twinkled in the light of the carriage—priceless, ephemeral. Each one was worth more than a house, more than the museum they had been kept in, or perhaps even more than the Grand Opera and Theater.

They were also, from what Zosia could tell as she handled them, entirely useless. The sparkling aura emitting from the six of them didn’t shed anywhere near as much light as the moon crystals on the walls around them.

None of them created flames or redirected the wind, none of them held heat or cold—for all Zosia could tell, they were just very pretty rocks.

Tytania huffed loudly, causing Zosia to look up. The other woman's legs were now crossed as well as her arms. She was pouting again.

"What?" Zosia asked. *She can't be that upset about the interruption. Besides, we have the gems. What is there to be cranky about?*

"Do you think they're worth it?" Tytania asked, eyeing the jewels with the displeased look of someone who had ordered tea but found only hot water in their mug.

Zosia studied the crystals while she thought. When it came to monetary worth, it was obvious—galaxy crystals like these were legends. Both in the sense that there weren't many around and also because they were mysterious; no one was quite sure where they came from. Naturally, things that were rare, curious, and beautiful carried a high price tag.

But were they worth the hassle Zosia and Tytania had gone through to attain them?

"Maybe," Zosia replied. "Maybe not. But it's not important. The Under wants them for some reason and that has to be good enough for us."

Whatever the purpose or desire behind obtaining the crystals was, Zosia wasn't high enough in the organization to be told. And that was fine with Zosia. She didn't care about the Under and whatever goals they had, she just wanted to be paid for her work.

"Really?" Tytania said. "Because I would have guessed you cared about them a lot, seeing how you're practically drooling over them."

Zosia tore her gaze away from the gem for a moment to shoot a flat look at Tytania before turning back to the stone.

Was it wrong to admire them? They were exceptionally beautiful. Zosia had handled countless treasures as a detective—both the legal side and the not so legal parts—but what other relic or item could compare to this? It was like holding a piece of the cosmos in her palm.

It also wasn't hers. And it could never be hers, unless she wanted the entire Under on her tail.

Zosia placed it carefully back in the bag. "I care about the mission. That's all."

"That's all?" Something passed over Tytania's face. She crossed her arms, pushing back into the cushion. "So at the museum tonight..." Tytania paused, studying Zosia carefully. "You did that for the mission?"

Zosia hesitated. If she had come to learn one thing about Tytania, it was that the other woman was an enigma wearing a mask. *What is she really asking?*

Zosia had a small guess, a slightly startling one, but just like earlier with the gems, she didn't want to get her hopes up for nothing.

"It was a success in the end, wasn't it?" Zosia replied.

Her vague response hung heavily between them. It wasn't really an answer and Tytania must know it too.

Across the carriage, Zosia watched the rise and fall of Tytania's chest. Her face was blank, fixed in neutrality. Zosia watched, searching for the slightest hint of something, anything—but found nothing on the actress's face.

"I suppose," Tytania said, her voice as empty as her mask. After a moment, she turned to the window, fixating on the darkness beyond.

It felt like a dismissal.

Zosia felt a small pang of something... disappointment? Longing? She had the feeling she had somehow messed up, simply by being honest and doing her job.

The rest of the trip passed in silence. The crystals were nestled securely back in the pouch on Zosia's lap. Tytania hadn't asked for them back.

Zosia focused on them for a while, lulled by the bump of the carriage in the night, but her thoughts kept drifting back to the woman across from her, like a lost ship in a whirlpool. She knew she had misstepped somehow, somewhere. But how could she fix it, if she wasn't quite sure what she had done? The other woman spoke and acted in mysteries that didn't have logical solutions.

Could she just ask her? Zosia hated that she still wasn't sure where they stood with each other, or if she could believe the words that came from Tytania's teasing mouth.

Additionally, even if Tytania spoke the truth, Something told Zosia she might not be ready to know the answer.

Tytania was... Zosia wasn't sure. But somewhere along the line, she had let Tytania in and now Zosia was susceptible to the other woman.

Zosia hunkered down to ponder, her mind running in circles.

The rest of the ride passed in tense quiet.

~ ACT IV ~

The Town of Irdien

Streets

THE CARRIAGE DRIVER seemed more than happy to snatch the money from Zosia's hand. After counting the coins one by one right in front of them, she gave them a final dirty look and departed.

"Good riddance," Tytania mumbled as she watched the carriage meander back up the main road out of town. "I swear, the drivers around here..."

Zosia didn't disagree. Still, the tension that had built up between her Tytania in the carriage lingered, and she didn't want to risk making it worse. She settled for an accommodating nod instead.

Lifting her hand against her brow, Zosia squinted through the bright sunlight. The port town of Irdien lay nestled in an inlet along the Glorin Coast. The water in the harbor sparkled in a long path that grew wider the further it stretched out to sea. High above, the sun dazzled in a cloudless sky.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Tytania said, leaning close to Zosia.

Tytania either didn't feel the tension that was still smoldering between them, or she was pointedly ignoring it.

Zosia shifted away slightly. "Yes. I suppose so."

Around them, townhouses and shops painted a motley of colors dotted the road. It was a bustling main street that teemed with people, carts, and small shop stands. Zosia scanned the buildings down at the edge of the harbor. They were so far away that their colors started to merge together beneath the sun. Although they were too distant to discern which was their destination, she could see that the road they were on wound down to the water's edge.

"We should head to the docks," Zosia said, gesturing to the harbor. "The passenger ships should have a stand somewhere."

"It's a big building, the same one where passengers disembark." Tytania raised an eyebrow. "You didn't come through here on your way to Partyn?"

"No," Zosia replied. "My ship went further north to Rivain."

"I guess it makes sense that the Under wanted to keep our trails uncrossed." Tytania shrugged. "No point in doing that now though, hmm?"

The comment didn't seem to be bitter, nor was it teasing. Zosia wasn't quite sure how to read it. She was painfully aware of the balancing beam she was walking on with the other woman. "I suppose not."

"Well, since you're new to Irdien, I'll lead," Tytania said, pointing to the harbor. "Follow me."

Tytania swept forward. People moved easily out of her way as she moved down the street. Zosia couldn't help but wonder if it was the other woman's height, or perhaps the sweeping steps she took, each one as precise as if she was about to step into a dance routine. Or maybe it was that aura about her—even in her roughed up clothes with questionable stains, striding down a dirty street that smelled like fish, Tytania acted like she was constantly in the spotlight. She commanded attention everywhere she went as easily and confidently as breathing.

In comparison, Zosia was a silent shadow at her side, unnoticeable next to such a beacon of attention. Their jobs for the Under suddenly seemed silly to Zosia. Perhaps Tytania would have made a more commanding officer, while Zosia, quiet and detail-orientated, would be better suited to the shadows.

What a curious pair we make.

The two of them were complimentary, in an ironic kind of way. Like two opposites drawn together to form a cohesive and working whole. The thought brought the hint of a smile to Zosia's lips.

She followed after Tytania with a bit more energy in her step.

The sound of waves knocking against the pier and the cry of gulls welcomed them to the harbor. After a quick look around to regain her bearings, Tytania was able to find the pier where the passenger ship that matched their tickets docked. They stopped briefly to ask someone who looked like a sailor, who then directed them further down the pier to a covered pavilion.

The pavilion's slate-tiled roof cast a protective shadow over several booths and covered stacks of cargo. They passed one stand for registering trade shipments, a holding pen for live animals, and then finally found the ticket booth for passengers. After a quick conversation with the person manning the booth, they learned that the papers they had received from the Under were vouchers. The ticket seller exchanged the papers for tickets for the next ship's departure.

“Mid-morning tomorrow,” Tytania said, studying the small print on their new documents. She looked up at Zosia. “Which means we’re staying the night here in Irdien.”

Zosia tucked her chin against a gust of wind that whistled across the pier. Once it had let up, she nodded to Tytania. “Doesn’t seem like we have another choice.”

If her assessments of the police department and mayor were correct, chances were slim that a patrol would make it the nearby towns around Partyn, nevermind a day’s ride away to Irdien. Still, Zosia preferred to err on the side of caution. She had been hoping to leave the continent sooner rather than later. But if there weren’t any ships, there was nothing they could do but wait.

Zosia took their tickets and tucked them carefully back into the pouch. The papers folded inside easily with plenty of space to spare. After paying the carriage driver, there wasn’t a single coin left for other expenses.

Tytania eyed the pouch as if reading Zosia’s thoughts.

“Skimpy Under,” Tytania laughed. “Good thing you have me.”

She dug around, patting her sleeves. After a moment, her hands slid beneath her breasts, pushing the fabric taut in a way that Zosia found to be irksomely eye-catching.

Zosia paled, sparing a furtive at the dock workers and other people going about their business on the pier. “What are you doing!?” she hissed at Tytania.

“Aha!” To Zosia’s complete horror, Tytania reached down into her shirt. She dug around for a second before her hand emerged victoriously with yet another small pouch—this time a green velvet one.

Zosia could not fathom a way for the other woman to possibly have more pouches there, especially now that she knew Tytania wasn’t wearing a bra.

“How many of those do you have on you?” Zosia asked, equal parts exasperated and impressed.

“I have lots of places where I hide things,” Tytania replied. “I can show you later.”

“I—” Zosia stopped; that felt somehow dangerous. She waved Tytania in front of her. “Let’s just find an inn. Also...” She plucked the new pouch from Tytania’s fingers. “Some different clothes. We shouldn’t keep walking around in these.”

She gestured to her worn-down police uniform and Tytania's stolen martial guard outfit. The blood speckling their clothes had long since dried, but the stains were suspicious.

"Fine by me," Tytania said. "I'm always game for an outfit change. You should see how fast I can take off my cloth—"

"Let's go." Zosia took Tytania's arm and steered her down the pier and off the docks.

Irdien was a stop along several cruise lines, and the harbor had a collection of tourist shops. It didn't take them long to find several clothing stores. The shops here attracted cruise-goers and ferry-riders with everything from Island sundresses to fur-lined jackets that would have been suited for the mountains of Ridon to the north or Lythenor across the sea.

As they meandered around the harbor, the last traces of tension Zosia had hung onto from their time in the carriage ebbed away, as if carried off by the waves. Here, following one another up and down the narrow pathways and breathing in the fresh sea air, Zosia felt like a new person. The memory of Partyn and the role Zosia had played there felt stripped away by the salty breeze, leaving an open ocean of possibilities in its wake.

From the sparkle in Tytania's eyes as she skipped from one shop to the next, Zosia hoped the other felt the same.

After perusing several shops, Zosia found a lovely dark blouse and pressed pants in a second-hand store. Tytania, meanwhile, tried on what must have been a hundred different items across ten shops before finally choosing an outfit. As she ducked out of the shop's doorway to where Zosia was waiting outside, Zosia took in Tytania's new clothes. She sported a leather jacket over a flashy blouse patterned with gold, with white pants to complete the ensemble. Very tight white pants, in fact, that accentuated the other woman's long legs.

"How do I look?" Tytania said, spinning around so the tassels hanging from her jacket chased her hips.

Zosia weighed the potential benefits of telling the truth with the risk of inflating the other woman's ego another notch. She settled for a safe: "Good."

"Well you look ravaging," Tytania said, reaching out to trace a finger along the subtle embroidery on Zosia's collar.

Zosia dodged the touch, but couldn't manage a frown. She felt light and happy in a way she hadn't in a very long time. She almost wished that their

ship would come later, if only so they could continue their carefree meandering in this cozy little town.

“Come on,” Zosia said, standing up. With Tytania in her bright array of color and Zosia in her cool blues and blacks, they made quite a striking pair. *Complimentary opposites, indeed.* “Let’s go find a place to stay before it gets dark.”

The Inn

THERE WAS still a modest amount of money left in Tytania's stash when they returned to the main street. Zosia kept her eyes sharp, passing over the many intriguing souvenir shops and restaurants to look for an inn.

They found one right away, an impressive three-story building with a large wooden sign shaped like a bed. After finding out that it didn't have rooms with locked doors, Zosia led them further up the street to another building boasting rooms for rent. Tytania heard the price from the attendant and scoffed out loud before dramatically steering Zosia back outside.

"Highway robbery," Tytania cursed beneath her breath, "in broad daylight! They're giving thieves a bad name."

"If you say so," Zosia fought the urge to smile. "Come on. Let's keep looking."

They ducked in and out of several more inns, taverns, and even a renovated ship warehouse with hundreds of open bunks that offered no privacy whatsoever. Zosia's anxiety about finding a place before nightfall was just starting to overtake the burn in her calves when Tytania called out excitedly.

"Oh, here! This is the one, I can feel it." Tytania pushed open the door to a quaint-looking building.

They had come all the way to the edge of town; the building in front of them looked more like a house than an inn. Zosia eyed the two small gardens on either side of the door and their eclectic arrangement of flowers before she spotted a small plaque. A simple but charming bed had been chiseled into the wood. The inn's windows were open, allowing the sea breeze to brush against the collection of stained glass bobbles and ornaments pinned to the window panes. They spun slowly, reflecting the golden light of the setting sun.

"It had better be the one," Zosia replied with a smile. "It's the last inn in town."

An elderly woman in a pink apron met them inside, ushering them into a lobby that appeared to double as a living room. Upon finding that they had a room available for a modest fee, Tytania and Zosia gave each other a look

of approval. They paid for one night and followed the innkeeper up a flight of carpeted stairs. She brought them to a room at the end of a long hall.

“Sorry, dears,” the innkeeper said as she unlocked the door, “there’s just the one bed. I hope that won’t be a problem?”

“Not at all,” Tytania said with a grin, slipping forward the second the hefty door swung back on its hinges. Her immediate gasp caused Zosia to peer after her curiously.

The room was small but lovingly decorated. A four poster bed sat across from a window that stretched three panes along the wall. It overlooked a small garden on a cliff, with nothing but the ocean reaching out to the horizon beyond.

“I hope it’s to your liking,” the innkeeper said with a smile. “I’ll leave you two to enjoy. Dinner is an optional extra charge. If you’re interested, stop by the kitchen in an hour or so and we’ll put something together for you.”

Zosia thanked the innkeeper, who gave a small bow of her head and ambled back toward the lobby. Zosia closed the door softly behind her. As she did, she noticed not only the keyhole in the door, but an additional deadlock. She slid the heavy metal bolt into place with no small amount of delight. When it clicked shut, Zosia felt as if yet another weight had been removed from her shoulders. Her earlier happiness was now comfortably matched with a sense of security she hadn’t felt since she had arrived in Partyn, or perhaps since she had landed in Rivain what felt like forever ago.

This wouldn’t be over until they had safely disembarked on distant shores, of course, but for the moment, Zosia felt she could finally relax. She glanced at Tytania.

The other woman stood at the window with her hands on her hips, staring out to sea. When she looked back at Zosia, the evening light basked her features in rich warmth. The sunlight melded into her skin and teased out streaks of gold in her sunset-colored hair, bringing light to her emerald eyes. “Yes?”

Zosia realized she was staring.

“I think I see a safe box beneath the bed,” Zosia said hurriedly. “Do you want to put the crystals there?”

Tytania hummed, reaching into the tight band of her pants to retrieve the crystals from where she had put them earlier. Without her bag and with far less practice stashing things on her person, Zosia had felt the crystals were

more secure in Tytania's possession and had returned them just before they had arrived in Irdien.

Tytania's hand emerged with the pouch. She threw it up in the air, caught it, and then—without warning—tossed it to Zosia.

Zosia lurched forward to catch the priceless treasure before it hit the floor. Not that that would likely damage the crystals, but still.

"Hey!" she hissed. "Be careful."

Tytania shrugged, already moving around the bed. She hopped onto the edge and her eyes widened in delight as she sunk into the squishy comforter. She fell back, sinking into the cloud-like bedding with a look of bliss. "Loosen up, Zosia. They'll be fine."

"It's not a matter of being fine, it's a matter of care." Zosia crossed her arms, looking down at the parts of Tytania that remained visible. It was as if the bed had swallowed her up in a way that seemed both comfortable and inviting. The assortment of blankets and plush pillows made it appear cozy, but the bed itself was quite large. This was probably for the best, as they would be sleeping in it. *Together*.

Zosia clutched the pouch a little tighter to distract herself. They were going to be doing a lot of things together for the next few weeks until they got to Lythenor, and, Zosia had to remind herself, the most important of those things was watching over the gems.

It was worrisome how little Tytania seemed to care about the crystals. They were both their responsibility and obligation, the thing that secured their safe return to the Under, the preservation of their reputations, protection for their families, and a hefty reward. The crystals were essential. Why Tytania was treating them like yesterday's leftovers was beyond Zosia.

Tytania peered up from the bed, sighing as she took in Zosia's expression. "Don't think for a moment that I care about those rocks." She shifted to lean up on her elbows, her ponytail slightly looser after her roll in the sheets. Strands of silky pink fell over her shoulders. "The fun of those gems was stealing them. They're no longer interesting to me."

The frown on Zosia's face intensified. It was a ridiculous, but also an extremely Tytania thing to say. Zosia rubbed her thumb over the leather pouch thoughtfully. The jewels should be important to Tytania, too. *Unless...*

"You never told me earlier." Zosia stepped closer to the bed, staring down at Tytania. "What *is* your reward from the Under?"

Tytania laughed. One of her hands reached up to fall onto a pillow above her head. “Nothing.”

Now Zosia knew she was lying. There was no way any sane person would risk their lives on heists and be sent all over the world for nothing.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Zosia said, trying to keep her tone neutral. “But don’t lie to me.” There was no reason to be angry. Suspicious, sure—but angry? It wasn’t fundamentally wrong to keep personal, non-business-related secrets. *Right?* Zosia pushed back against her emotions, not liking the stewing feelings in her chest. “We’re partners, aren’t we?”

That finally got a slightly more serious look from Tytania. She shifted, rolling a bit until she was at the edge of the bed. She propped her head up on one palm as she stared up at Zosia. Her ponytail hung loose now, barely clutched in the ribbon hanging from her back. All it would take was one little pull to free her hair. Zosia wasn’t sure why that seemed important enough to note.

“I’m not lying,” Tytania insisted, unaware of Zosia’s wandering thoughts. “I don’t care about money, and I don’t need any favors from the sketchy Under. The drama and excitement are the reward for me. Honest.”

Zosia studied Tytania closely, but couldn’t see a lie or even teasing in those startlingly green eyes. In fact, in a rare display, Tytania looked wholeheartedly earnest.

“Besides.” Tytania must have picked up on Zosia’s uncertainty because any hint of her usual theatrics was gone from her voice. “It’s who I am, Zosia. A star, remember?”

The words were cocky, but something in Tytania’s voice told Zosia they were anything but. Instead, it sounded almost like an excuse—a heavy layer of stage makeup put on again and again, until traces of it remained even after a hard scrub.

“You really... don’t want anything?”

“Nope. I don’t need it.”

Zosia swallowed. Against logic, she found herself believing the other woman. It matched with everything she knew about Tytania—from her crazy stunts, to the delight in her eyes at the crime scene, to how she craved the spotlight, wherever it might come from. The idea that she did this for the pure thrill of it did not seem that far-fetched.

But to not want anything else... Did she not have family? No home? Nothing? Zosia studied the woman in front of her as if seeing her for the

first time. If she was telling the truth, and Zosia was inclined to believe it more by the minute, Zosia couldn't help but feel sad for her. For all her glory and stardom, the path Tytania walked seemed like a lonely one.

"Oh, come on, Zosia," Tytania's face didn't change, but it didn't have to. Zosia had seen beneath the mask and had found the truth within the enigma. A mask was pointless once you knew what rested beneath. "Don't look at me like that."

"Tytania, I..." *What?* What could Zosia say? That she thought she might understand Tytania's addiction for the spotlight? That maybe the other woman just wanted attention, just wanted love? But that was a rather impertinent thing to say to someone; it wasn't her place to label or sort the other woman like this—Tytania wasn't a crime that she had to put the pieces together and solve. Zosia hadn't even done that since the academy, anyway. These days, her job was making sure things stayed safely in the shadows. Perhaps Tytania's history was one such thing—better left quietly behind, so the woman could stand strong in the spotlight she so enjoyed.

Tytania waved her hand in the air in a clear dismissal of the conversation and turned slightly, rolling away from Zosia.

"How about this—don't give them to the Under. You keep the jewels. Alright?"

"What?" Zosia stared at Tytania's back.

"I'm serious. Take them. Keep them. Throw them out the window—whatever you'd like."

The pouch of jewels suddenly felt very heavy in Zosia's hand. "You'd seriously let me keep them?"

Tytania glanced back over her shoulder, not a flicker of hesitation in her eyes. "Yes."

Zosia's grip tightened on the pouch. The crystals were worth a *lot* of money. Forget having enough funds to move her mother into a better care facility, with these crystals the bills from the doctor would never be a concern again. She wouldn't have to go far away on such risky assignments but would instead have the freedom to pick and choose jobs that interested her. In fact, she wouldn't have to work at all if she didn't want to.

Well, assuming the Under didn't hunt her down first.

"I have to ask you, though," Tytania said, her serious tone pulling Zosia back from her frenzied fantasies. Tytania's gaze locked on Zosia, making

her feel like she was suddenly pinned in place by a spotlight. “If you did take the crystals, would you be satisfied?”

Zosia let the words trickle through her mind. She had enjoyed her studies and training at Minthol’s Academy. She had a knack for the paperwork, no matter how complicated, and she was good at keeping things organized and noticing details. When she graduated with honors, she had been pleased to find several offers for employment and had chosen the highest bidder.

Sure, it was ironic that the top client turned out to be the same criminals they had been trained to hunt down at school, but Zosia had found that she didn’t really care which hand passed over the money. It wasn’t like the law offices in Lythenor or the Partyn Police Department were stellar places to work, either. She thought of the department she had just left, managed by a chief who should have retired years ago and a mayor who would do anything to be reelected. Every organization was self-serving in its own way. Zosia had simply picked the best option from a bad assortment.

But as she felt the weight of the pouch in her hands, full of gems that offered an infinite world of possibility, Zosia couldn’t help but wonder. Maybe it was time to stop serving others and start working for herself.

“Hypothetically speaking, if I were to keep these,” Zosia said, eyeing Tytania, “I would feel the need to compensate you for your share. You helped me get them, after all. You deserve a piece.”

“Oh?” Tytania raised an eyebrow, her usual light nature sneaking back in. She rolled back toward Zosia. “How very just for a criminal.”

Seeing the smirk at the edge of her lips made Zosia feel lighter too. Or perhaps it was the thrill of a new path opening up, or the heady allure of the treasure they possessed. She shrugged playfully.

“It’s a shame then,” Zosia said, pressing a finger to her chin as if thinking, “that you don’t want anything.”

“Whoa whoa,” Tytania said, sitting up straight. The bed creaked as she moved. “I said I didn’t want anything from the Under. That doesn’t mean I don’t want something from *you*.”

Zosia paused, tapping her finger. This was all theoretical, of course, but now she was curious. “And what would I be able to get for you that the Under couldn’t?”

“Come on, Zosia,” Tytania drawled, the smile spreading on her lips. “I thought that one would be obvious.” Tytania shifted on the bed, pulling her knees beneath her so she could sit up taller. They were now eye-to-eye. “In

exchange for my assistance getting the crystals, I'd ask for just one little thing."

"Name it," Zosia replied. Selling even a single crystal would cover almost any expense, and they had six of them. A carriage, a house, a mansion—she could buy it for Tytania. *Although those are all things the Under could provide...*

"A kiss."

"I—" Zosia froze.

Tytania blinked up her, her gaze playful and her lashes lowered. The smirk lingered on her lips, but she wasn't laughing anymore. Kneeling on the bed with dark eyes and rumpled clothing from her antics, Zosia would be lying if she said she didn't find Tytania enticing right now.

What Zosia should have done was ask if Tytania was joking. She should have laughed, and kept the mood light and friendly as they moved on. But perhaps it was everything that had happened between them in the past two days catching up, or the heady power of a fallen Empire's treasure she held leisurely in her hand. Perhaps it was Tytania's own sparkly allure, that aura of specialness that blurred the lines of mundane reality into stardom.

She could take her pick of excuses. Beneath them all, Zosia felt a simmering craving—she wanted to give Tytania what she asked for, not just to acquiesce, but because Zosia wanted to kiss her again.

Zosia stepped forward, close enough that her knees pushed into the comforter. The pillowy blanket melded against her with no resistance at all.

Like a hunter hesitant to startle their approaching prey, Tytania didn't move. She watched Zosia raptly from her position on the bed.

"You did mention earlier that you like...warmer rewards." Zosia's voice was quiet. Part of her still couldn't believe she was doing this, that she would let herself be pulled along by Tytania again. The other part of her was yelling that it was about time.

"You remember correctly," Tytania said, her voice low and sweet.

Zosia swung one knee, then the other, up onto the bed. Although the blankets were just as soft as they had looked, her attention was firmly fixated on Tytania as she knelt in front of her.

"Are you sure, though?" Zosia asked. She reached out to brush her fingers against Tytania's thigh.

Tytania mirrored the action, her hand skimming lightly against Zosia's blouse. The pads of her fingers rose and fell over the silky fabric, teasing

the row of silver buttons down Zosia's front, each one quivering in her wake.

Zosia swallowed. "One kiss, in exchange for six of the most valuable treasures in the world? Seems like a steal."

"It is," Tytania breathed as she leaned forward. "It's a steal for me."

Zosia laughed softly, her breath mingling with Tytania's. She went to lift her hand, only to remember that she was still holding the pouch. The jewels suddenly didn't seem all that important. They were made of stone, after all—they could wait.

She tossed the pouch carefully aside. It landed somewhere on the comforter and sunk in; out of sight and out of mind.

That got a delighted grin from Tytania. She pressed forward, pushing one of her knees between Zosia's. She then wrapped her hand around Zosia's hip, tugging the other woman closer.

Zosia let herself be handled without complaint, although she was very aware of the pleased smirk on the other woman's face. Zosia found she wanted nothing more than to wipe it off—so she did.

As her lips met Tytania's, the explosion of heat in Zosia's chest was stronger than any alcohol. It felt like a flame crystal had been dropped into her heart, setting her insides ablaze. She rested a hand on the other woman's thigh, only to soon find her fingers digging into fabric and flesh as the kiss intensified.

It felt way too soon that Tytania was pulling back. Zosia wasn't ready—air be damned, she wanted more. The hand that wasn't kneading into Tytania's thigh lifted to tangle in pink hair before Zosia could stop herself. Tytania's barely surviving ponytail finally slipped free of its hair ribbon as she wove her fingers in. She used her newfound grip to bring their lips together once again.

In between the hot presses of their lips and teeth, Zosia could feel Tytania's smile. When Zosia finally had to twist away to suck in air, she felt the other woman's laughter beneath her fingers.

Zosia looked up, flushed and ready to say something in her defense, only for Tytania to press a finger to her lips.

"I believe," Tytania said. "I only bargained for one kiss."

"Are you complaining?" Zosia said around Tytania's finger, unsure whether or not she should be offended.

“Never.” Tytania pushed lightly against Zosia’s bottom lip, the pad of her finger tingling on the already flushed skin. “I’m used to getting more than expected. I am a thief, you remember. In fact...”

Tytania’s other hand snuck up beneath Zosia’s uniform, her fingers surprisingly cool against Zosia’s heated skin. “I might be tempted to take a little more.”

She replaced her finger with her lips for a deep press against Zosia’s mouth. Tytania turned her head slightly, pressing a series of quick kisses down to the corner of Zosia’s mouth. “Who knew you’d be so eager? I’m going to take full advantage for as long as you’ll let me.”

Zosia didn’t deign that with a response. There was nothing she could say to defend herself, not when she craved more. Like the undoing of a dam, all of her restrained want for Tytania was spilling out.

And so what if she was a little pent up? Zosia found she wanted to continue what they had started in the carriage—no, the dressing room. Or perhaps before. All of Tytania’s teasing, all of their almoses were enough to make a woman go mad. She could make a very reasonable case and pin the blame on Tytania later. Right now she just *wanted*.

Instead of speaking, Zosia withdrew her grip from Tytania’s thigh and hair to grab the other woman’s shoulders. She dipped her fingers beneath Tytania’s jacket and pulled back, tugging the outer layer down and off.

Tytania hummed her approval as she slipped out of the garment, tossing it away. As soon as it was gone, her hands were back on Zosia, snaking beneath the hem of Zosia’s blouse and sending shivers across the bare skin of Zosia’s stomach.

“You know,” Tytania said, leaning in so her breath was hot against Zosia’s ear. “I’ve wanted this since long before Marzena. Probably the first heist—no, at the Under. The introduction. You and your smug superiority, that uniform—it’s all really hot. You’re so intense. Open like a book, sure, but that’s hot too.”

Zosia flushed. *That long...?*

She could remember their first introduction, way back in some hovel beneath the streets of Lythenor. Zosia had still been wearing her graduation robes, clutching the very generous offer for a first mission. Tytania had taken the hand she had extended and, rather than shaking it, had pressed a flirtatious kiss on her knuckles. In hindsight, Zosia should have known right then and there that she and her heart were in trouble.

“Stop reminiscing,” Zosia scolded with no bite in her voice. “We’re here now. Make the most of it.”

“Oohh!” Tytania crowed, her gentle touches against Zosia’s sides becoming more intense as she grazed her fingernails against the heated skin. Zosia gasped at the sensation, her hips shifting closer to Tytania. “Just what I wanted to hear.”

Zosia’s shirt was up and over her head before she knew what was happening. Her bra immediately followed.

Tytania whistled lowly, raking her eyes down Zosia’s chest, lingering heavily on Zosia’s breasts. “It’s already worth the wait—”

Tytania was cut off by Zosia’s hands tugging at her shirt. Tytania laughed as the top came off, tossing it somewhere alongside her jacket and Zosia’s clothes. She was left bare from the waist up, wearing nothing more than the bandages around her arm.

Zosia paused, her breath coming heavy as her eyes raked down Tytania’s body—the beautiful curve of her breasts, the rise and fall of her rib cage. Zosia took her in until her eyes caught on Tytania’s bandaged arm. The mostly healed cut on Zosia’s own hand hadn’t been bothering her at all, but if Tytania’s newer wound still hurt, then perhaps physical activity wasn’t a smart idea right—

“No more thinking,” Tytania said right before she stole another kiss. She took Zosia’s hands, gently guiding them to her waist. “Unless it’s about how to get rid of the rest of these.” She gestured playfully at their pants.

Zosia’s attention was back in full. “Easy. Lay down.”

Happy to oblige, Tytania fell back against the blankets. She looked up at Zosia, the invitation clear.

“Lift your hips.” Zosia eyed the waist of Tytania’s pants, noticing right away that the tight clothing was going to be more of a challenge than the rest of the outfit had been. Still, it was nothing compared to the corset.

Zosia hooked her fingers beneath the waist band, reveling in the warmth of Tytania’s soft skin.

“Any more pouches I should look out for?” Zosia teased as she peeled the fabric down, revealing more of Tytania. When her fingers reached the top of Tytania’s underclothes, she pushed slightly deeper, grabbing the undergarment and tugging it along as well.

Tytania laughed, although it came out slightly more strained than usual. Zosia loved the sound of it. “No, I’m out of pouches. Sorry to disappoint.”

“You do a lot of things—*crazy things*—” Zosia said, and it took a mountain’s worth of effort to pull her gaze from the soft trail of hair that was widening the further the pants dropped. Above her, Tytania’s eyelashes fluttered slightly, her chest rising, and Zosia felt like she had never had a drink in her entire life. “—but you never disappoint.”

It was the truth. No matter what ridiculous plans Tytania schemed or exorbitant actions she took, she always delivered. She had managed to get every crystal she had been sent for while also performing at the theater. When it came to Tytania, everything about her was like walking on a tightrope—right on the edge of falling, yet never slipping. Zosia found she wanted to cling on and hold this storm of a person for however long she could.

“Guess I have a reputation to uphold, don’t I?” Tytania leaned forward, one elbow sinking into the bed so she could reach down and tug the rest of her pants off. They flew to join the rest of their discarded clothes.

Completely bare beneath Zosia’s gaze, Tytania’s hair draped over her shoulders, slipping across her skin to curl over her breasts. Her chest was rising and falling quicker than usual, and Zosia’s gaze dragged down the tight lines of her stomach to the where her thighs met. It was overwhelming how attractive she was. Zosia thought no one had ever been as gorgeous as Tytania was in this moment.

Zosia swallowed.

Tytania followed the movement with hungry eyes. “I’ll tell you what.” She shifted forward until she kneeled, leaning over Zosia so her hair fell around them in rivulets, like silken ropes entwining them together. Zosia didn’t know where to look when everything about her was so hot. “I’m going to thoroughly wreck your expectations *and* you. I’ll set the bar so high that no one else is ever going to come close.”

Zosia shivered. Locked in place yet unable to keep still, she trailed her hands up Tytania’s sides, urging her closer. “I’ll hold you to it.”

Tytania grinned.

Zosia lost track of things for a moment as the room spun, the beams of the four poster bed merging with the curtains as her naked back hit the bed.

With their positions flipped, Tytania was able to tug off Zosia’s pants in significantly less time than it had taken Zosia to remove hers. Before Zosia had a moment to feel embarrassed at her nakedness, her leg was up and over Tytania’s shoulder.

“Gorgeous,” Tytania breathed. She began pressing kisses along the sensitive inner skin of Zosia’s thigh. “Let’s see how much you can take.”

“Is that a challeng—” Zosia’s words broke into a moan. She trembled beneath Tytania’s lips against the sensitive skin of her upper thigh.

It wasn’t long before she was twisting a hand into the sheets, the other reaching out to tangle in Tytania’s hair, pulling the other closer and deeper.

Warmth exploded in Zosia, pinpointed in one location, yet so strong that she felt it across her whole body in mind-shattering waves of bliss.

Tytania took far more than her promised kiss. Zosia let it her take it eagerly. She lost count of the press and slide of those sinful lips against her.

In between moans, shudders, and the occasional switching of positions, Zosia became completely convinced that Tytania was right—nothing in the world could compete; no amount of money nor crystals could ever come close to what Zosia was feeling now.

Warm rewards were, truly, the best.

The Inn

THE MUTED CRY of seagulls brought Zosia slowly back to consciousness. Loathe to leave the nest of warmth she was bundled in, she cracked open an eye.

The room was still dark; the sun was only just peeking over the horizon line in the distance, painting a trail of golden red across the water. They had forgotten to close the curtains last night.

Zosia groaned, grateful that there were still a few hours remaining before their ship departed. She closed her eyes and nestled deeper into the tangle of sheets. Tytania's arm was there, just inches away, and all too appealing. Zosia cuddled closer to the other woman's warmth.

Tytania, feeling Zosia stirring, stretched with a loud groan. Her long limbs went taut and then relaxed beneath the sheets. She sat up slowly, keeping one arm around Zosia as she used the other to brush hair from her face.

Zosia watched her, fighting the urge to cling tighter and not let the other woman up.

Tytania looked disheveled, but not in the way that Zosia felt. Bathed in the first glow of a new morning, Tytania looked like one of the statues in the museum, with each feature lovingly chiseled into creamy marble. With her hair falling around her, chest bare and speckled with red marks from the night before, she looked like a goddess. She was infinitely prettier than the Crown Jewels.

Zosia wanted to hide her face in the pillows—or, better, Tytania's chest—and not get up. Damn the police and the mayor, who, despite their incompetence, would probably find them eventually if they were to linger here. Damn the Under and their stupid, risky missions that kept them on the go. Damn the crystals, wherever Zosia had flung them the night before—damn it all. Right now, Zosia wanted nothing more than to stay here, warm and safe in this bed far away from everything, with this woman who had made her see more than stars last night.

Zosia peered up at Tytania from where she was nestled in the sheets, still refusing to budge. There was no more denying it. She could run to the ends

of the known world, but she couldn't run from what was inside her. Zosia was completely enraptured by the other woman.

A finger pressed to Zosia's forehead, right between her eyes.

"I can practically hear your mind spinning around in there," Tytania said. She turned her head, her long hair brushing across skin and blankets. Her eyebrows pressed together slightly. "Don't tell you're regretting last night...?"

"No," Zosia mumbled, voice muffled into the pillow. *Far from it.* Last night had been amazing. Zosia had never had a night like that. Her few other partners in bed had been fine, but none of them held a light to Tytania. Then again, Zosia had never felt like this with any of them.

And there it is. Zosia shook off Tytania's finger to hide her face in the pillow, shutting out the light that was beginning to spill through the windows. *This is more than just a little crush, isn't it?*

With the heat of the previous night satisfied, Zosia had thought she might have gotten it out of her system. But the pull to the other woman remained as strong as ever. In fact, Zosia fretted, it might even be stronger than it was before.

She squirmed deeper into the bedding as if she could bury herself below these terribly deep thoughts. It didn't work.

But if I do want... something more, Zosia's traitorous mind continued, *what if it was just a fling for Tytania? And now that she's gotten what she wanted, she'll be done...?*

She resisted the urge to groan at herself. With stolen goods in their bag and a getaway ship about to whisk them away, they had way too much at stake to be worrying about feelings of this magnitude. She should not be sacrificing time and energy on this right now.

"Zosia?" Tytania's voice came from above. She could feel the other woman leaning over her.

"Mmf." Zosia said into the pillow.

"Not to interrupt... whatever it is you're doing," Tytania said, and Zosia could hear the amusement in her voice, "but breakfast is here."

Zosia lifted her head. She blinked, her eyes straining against the light after the blackness inside her pillow. "Breakfast?"

"It's at the door," Tytania said.

"Then go get it."

"I'm naked."

“And I’m not?” Zosia said, gesturing vaguely at the sheets still covering both of them.

“You raise a valid point,” Tytania said, pressing closer. Beneath the sheets, Zosia could feel Tytania’s legs entertaining with her own. “Here’s an idea. Since we’re both already undressed, we might as well make use of the opportunity...”

A finger brushed against Zosia’s stomach, then slowly began to drag downward.

So—not done after all. Feelings or not, it seemed Tytania was still interested in Zosia. A small piece of the iceberg weighing heavily in Zosia’s chest broke off and floated away.

She wiggled out of reach, trying to keep the smile off her face. “No chance,” she said as she rolled over, tugging the blankets with her as she flipped away from the other woman. Everywhere Tytania had touched felt warm in a pleasant but dangerous way. “No more sex until the ship. I don’t want to miss our boat.”

Zosia could feel Tytania jump up on the bed next to her.

“Did I hear that ship sex is on the agenda?” The other woman pressed excitedly over Zosia, pushing her weight onto the bundle of blankets Zosia had gathered around herself in a big cocoon. “Now that’s worth getting up for.”

Zosia deliberated her mistake—if it had been one—as Tytania hopped off the bed. There were shuffling sounds, likely Tytania hunting for her clothes, along with the humming of a song that Zosia recognized from *‘The Lady’s Gain’*.

The loud slide of the deadbolt joined the symphony, followed by the click of the door handle. The sounds reached a finale with an appreciative whistle from Tytania.

Zosia, lured by curiosity, rolled back around, maneuvering herself and her blankets so she rested against the headboard.

Tytania, fully dressed and somehow immaculate, was returning to the bed. In her hands was a large tray with several small dishes and a basket. As Tytania set the tray on the bed, Zosia saw freshly buttered rolls and two mugs holding dark drinks. Tendrils of soft steam rose from the tray, curling temptingly into the air.

Tytania sat down and immediately reached for a roll, picking it up carefully. It was halfway to Tytania’s mouth when Zosia reached out to pull

a strand of hair away from her lips.

Zosia lingered, sliding the hair between her fingers. She loved the feel of it, loved touching every part of Tytania, actually. It was startling how much she wanted to grab on and never let go.

Tytania lowered the roll and reached out to press a kiss against Zosia's knuckles. She pulled back with a smile. "What's this? So touchy feely. And here I thought you didn't want to play again until the boat."

Zosia twisted the strand of hair, looping it around her fingers. "I'm not playing," she replied, her voice quiet.

Tytania cocked her head, a question in her eyes.

Zosia swallowed, suddenly not interested in the delicious-looking breakfast. Her earlier thoughts returned, digging into her defenses and leaving open doors in their wake.

"Tytania," she started slowly. "If I can ask... what is this—" she gestured between them "—to you?"

Tytania's eyes widened. Then she started to laugh lightly. It was usually such a nice sound, one that Zosia liked to hear, but right now it caused her heart to plummet. She schooled her features in the way she imagined Tytania would, trying to keep the sheer disappointment contained.

Of course. It's just a funny game to her, isn't it? I was stupid to think otherwise and, worse, to want more.

"Are you not a detective?" Tytania laughed. She turned away from Zosia to reach for her roll.

"I am, in fact, a detective," Zosia said coldly. *This was such a bad idea.* She cursed herself and her stupid feelings. Why did she have to be such a fool for the other woman?

Tytania was still laughing as she picked up her breakfast. Zosia couldn't be less hungry despite the fact that she felt completely empty inside. Her stomach was sinking deeper than rock bottom.

"Then you really ought to put two and two together," Tytania said, her shoulders still shaking slightly with mirth. She brought her roll to her lips.

Yeah, I guess I should have. Zosia wanted to bury herself in the bed sheets. This time, she wouldn't come out. She'd stay in the bundle until the innkeeper threw her out into the streets. Or better, into the sea. Tytania could take the stupid gems and go.

"I love you," Tytania said, right before she took a bite.

Zosia watched blankly as Tytania tore off a piece of the still-steaming roll. Tytania's words must have echoed at least ten times through her mind before she could form words of her own. "What?"

"I said," Tytania repeated, "I love you. Can't believe you couldn't figure that one out. I thought it was crystal clear."

"Wha—" Zosia shook her head, staring at Tytania in shock. Forget whatever warm fuzzy feelings Zosia had been swatting around all morning—*love?*

The past cycle of the sun had been a busy one, sure, but this time yesterday morning they hadn't even been... whatever they were now. It had only been one night together. An excellent night, sure, and Zosia herself had been melancholy over wanting more. But now they were rocketing all the way to love?

How can she say it just like that, all of a sudden? And so casually!? There was only one logical answer. "Are you—"

"No," Tytania cut in. "I'm not lying. Not that I'm not a good liar. I'm an excellent liar and thief and actress." She stopped to pop the remainder of her roll in her mouth before narrowing her eyes and pointing a buttery finger at Zosia. "But I don't lie to you, so stop asking me that. It doesn't inspire much trust."

Zosia sat still, watching Tytania pick up another roll. Her heart was picking up speed of its own accord, and her mind was spinning hard but no thoughts were forming; only Tytania's 'I love you' going around and around between her ears.

Tytania lifted the next roll, then paused. Her mouth closed slowly, the corners of her lips pursed tightly. She didn't take her eyes off the food when she asked, "What about you?"

"Me?" Zosia replied, barely able to keep up with the conversation. Tytania really, truly liked her, more than like—apparently, she loved her. Zosia just couldn't get her mind around it. This was all happening extremely fast.

"Yes." Tytania blinked down at the roll. "Do you... also...?"

She trailed off, twisting the baked good in her hands as if it required a very thorough examination.

Yet another layer of shock was smothered onto Zosia when she realized that Tytania was being shy. She had never seen the woman without her cloak of confidence. This was entirely new, though not in a bad way. It was

like a star had fallen from the sky, only to reveal that it was just a human draped in sparkly gold.

Someone who shines brightly, seeking love.

Zosia's heart clenched around a myriad of emotions. Whatever shock she was swimming in right now, she knew she had become fond of the other woman—as more than a co-worker and more than a friend. The thought of being something even more than was not an unappealing one.

Zosia reached out, placing her hand over Tytania's.

Tytania finally looked up, her features soft and unsure. There was pure vulnerability in those intense green eyes that pierced Zosia's already fluttering heart, sinking in like an arrow.

“Let's just say,” Zosia whispered, “you stole more than the crystals in Partyn.”

Tytania blinked at her, then away. “A... aha.” She looked as delightfully lost with herself as Zosia had felt earlier.

Zosia held back her smile, not wanting to push the other woman. This was an adorable side of Tytania and she wanted to savor it. Besides, the other woman had swung hard with her confession earlier. It only seemed fair that Zosia got to enjoy a turn at discombobulating Tytania the way she so often did to Zosia.

“But you can't just give this treasure away on a whim. You need to hold onto it. Got it?”

Tytania met Zosia's gaze, her eyes alight. “To steal a heart! Oh, oh! I really am a good thief, aren't I.”

Zosia whacked her. So much for savoring the moment. “Promise me!”

“I promise, I promise!” Tytania laughed, her face flushed and eyes sparkling. She flung her roll, and it bounced somewhere past the bed just as their clothes had last night. Tytania lunged forward to clutch Zosia's hands in her own. “I'll take good care of your heart. *That's* a treasure worth keeping.”

Zosia finally gave in, shifting Tytania's grip to reach her arms around the other woman and pull her close. Tytania fell against her easily, the mugs on the tray clicking as the bed moved beneath them. Zosia was sure the other woman could feel Zosia's skin burning, but she didn't care.

“Good,” Zosia said. Her heart felt ready to burst with joy and her cheeks were going to start hurting from how wide she was smiling.

*Tytania might have gotten away with a heart, but I caught myself a thief.
The most beautiful, wonderful, infuriatingly gorgeous thief in the world.*

The Town of Irdien

Docks

THE WAVES splashed invitingly against the pier and below it. Every so often, a particularly large wave would squeeze a bubble of water up through cracks in the time-worn boards.

Around the bench where they sat, the harbor was already bustling with life. Late fishermen unloaded the last of their catch while passengers disembarked from a small ferry boat. Beyond the various vessels bobbing in the harbor, the sun was climbing upwards in the sky, spilling light across the waves that they would soon be riding across.

Tytania lounged next to Zosia, bouncing her crossed leg. Her usual boisterous confidence had seeped back since their heart-to-heart this morning, but there was still an undercurrent of excitement between them that had continued all the way down to the docks.

As they waited to board the large ship resting at the end of the pier, the hint of a blush lingered on Tytania's cheeks. Her eyes sparkled brighter than the sun against the waves in a way that Zosia found almost infuriatingly charming.

What was she going to do with Tytania and these feelings that now had a name and a mutual label? She supposed they'd have a whole week to explore things as they navigated both a new relationship and the sea.

Zosia shifted on the bench, feeling the pinch of something against her skin. Between the waistband of Zosia's pants and her hip, the pouch with the crystals pressed into her. Tytania had made her own opinion of the crystals clear, but Zosia still wasn't sure what she'd end up doing with them. For now, she would hold onto them. She supposed she had plenty of time to figure out what to do with those as well—assuming Tytania gave her any time to herself.

From the not-subtle looks the other woman kept flinging her way, Zosia doubted she'd get much time to dwell on her career choices. A few weeks ago, that would have been both inconceivable and unacceptable to Zosia. Now, she found she didn't mind it much at all. Her priorities had changed significantly since she had gotten closer to Tytania.

“Boarding in twenty minutes!” a woman yelled from the gangplank, loud enough to be heard over the noise of the docks. Across the pier behind her, their monster of a ship waited patiently, unshaken by the waves lapping its sides. “Last call for tickets to Lythenor!”

Zosia turned to Tytania, only to find the other woman already staring her way.

Tytania grinned.

“Are you ready?” Zosia asked. She mentally checked her list. The ferry ride was paid for, and they still had a bit of Tytania’s money they could exchange when they docked on the other continent. It would be enough to get them to the Under. Or, if Zosia did decide to keep the crystals, somewhere they could sell them. “Do we have everything we need?”

Tytania shifted on the bench, uncrossing her leg so their knees pressed together in a neat line of four.

“Let’s see,” Tytania said, “I have you. So yes, that’s everything.”

Zosia pushed her lightly, biting her lip to keep from smiling. The flirting, it seemed, would continue as always. It was a good thing she didn’t mind.

A horn sounded from the ship, drawing eyes from the small group of people who gathered on the pier. It sent Tytania leaping to her feet, holding out her hand to Zosia. Other passengers got to their feet as well, starting to form some semblance of a line in front of the ship.

The boat would ferry them across the ocean. For Zosia, it meant going home to Lythenor—back to where she had signed her contract with the Under, met Tytania, and embarked on the series of heists and cover-ups that were now at an end.

For Tytania... Zosia wasn’t sure. The other woman clearly didn’t like to talk about her past and Zosia didn’t want to pull the information out of her against her will. Perhaps things would come to light when they set foot on the other continent; or perhaps Tytania’s past would remain settled in the shadows of who she had become.

Regardless, wherever they went from here and whoever they worked for—the Under, the Law, themselves—Zosia felt confident. Everything they had been through had led to them here, to this moment. The jewels were just a small piece of their journey, and it was time for the next stage. The curtain was about to rise on their next adventure.

Zosia accepted Tytania’s hand, letting the other woman lift her to her feet.

Tytania was right again, Zosia thought, as she let Tytania sweep her towards the end of the line. As long as we're together, that's all we really need.

THE END

EPILOGUE

The Town of Irdien

Docks

A CLOUD passed over the docks of Irdien, washing the pier in shadow and causing the sparkles dancing on the waves to fade. They flickered out as if they had all simultaneously sunk into the sea.

The people on the longest pier in the harbor were too preoccupied to notice any change in the light. Dock workers and crew members hustled about, rolling barrels and heaving boxes onto nets of rope. Smaller items, including a few empty cages and oddly-shaped parcels wrapped in black canvas, were carried by hand. Cargo was moved up the board that perched between the ship and the dock before disappearing inside.

The great vessel waited obediently as it was filled, unbothered by the workers and the rowdy waves that licked and prodded its metal-plated sides. Before long, the plank that served as a bridge between the pier and the ship was empty. It stretched up from its raised platform on the dock to hook into a hole in the side—a door that opened like a maw, leading to darkness within.

“Now boarding!” someone yelled.

The handful of passengers, set apart from the dock workers and crew by their clean clothes, filed to the plank, carrying their personal baggage along with them.

One person came to a stop a few paces from the back of the line, their breathing sharp from having run down the pier. It was hard to see from so far back, especially between all of the colorful outfits and piles of personal baggage, but they would have to make do.

They watched. And waited.

A man was the first one to step up from the dock and onto the platform where the plank perched. His shoulders were a sweeping arc, his body so large that the suitcase in his hands looked like a child’s toy. His pristine gray suit had no markings or emblems, but there could be no doubt—the man had at least a bit of the Other in him.

Not that one.

They watched as the man looked around curiously.

After a moment, one of the crew members standing near the ticket booth stumbled forward. It was hard to tell from afar, but it almost looked like the girl had been pushed. She sent a dirty look back to her crew mates before marching over to the plank with slouched shoulders. She took the man's ticket, mumbled something the figure couldn't hear, and the man embarked with a polite nod.

The next person in line stepped onto the platform slowly, but kept back from the bottom of the plank. The trepidation on their face was clear as they watched the large man wobble up the narrow piece of wood.

The board bent slightly beneath his weight, but it held firm. The maw of the ship swallowed him whole.

Only once he was safely inside did the woman next in line extend her hand to present a ticket to the crew girl and take her turn on the board.

Not that one, either.

The figure watched a few more people take their turns boarding.

No. Not them. Not them, either.

They tugged their lip with their teeth. Perhaps the information had been faulty, or their source had given them the wrong port town.

They were just beginning to weigh their options when a girl leaped onto the platform. She landed and straightened like a cat, her pink hair tied up in a long ponytail that swished playfully behind her. She smiled at something below her, her grin as bright as flashy as her alias.

The figure straightened up. There was no mistaking it.

The Star.

They took a step forward, digging into their bag to take out a crumpled voucher and take their place at the back of the line.

Up on the platform, The Star reached her hand down into the crowd. She pulled another woman up behind her.

The figure frowned. They had not been told anything about a companion. Had The Star picked her up here in Idrien, as some last-minute consort for the trip?

The companion handed their tickets to the crew girl, then turned out toward the pier. It was a fast and calculating look. She swept dark eyes over the crowd, as if searching for something or someone in particular. Not finding whatever she had been looking for, she turned back to the crew girl.

A note of discontent settled in the figure's stomach. The Star's companion might be a problem.

Halfway up the board, The Star jumped—causing the plank to wobble precariously. It earned her a look from her partner that was so livid the figure could feel the heat even across the pier.

Not a last-minute consort, then. Those two are familiar with each other.

There was still a chance that The Star's woman was innocent, oblivious to who and what she was traveling with. A shame for her that innocence didn't matter. There were to be no witnesses, no traces left.

"Ticket?"

The figure was jerked from their thoughts by a hand shoved in their face. The line had slowly been swallowed up by the ship as they mulled through things and they now stood before the platform. The crew girl stared down at them, a bored look in her eyes. Up close, she was quite tall, with the weatherworn look and sunkissed skin of someone who spent most of their time on the open sea.

The crew girl's jaw worked at something in her mouth. "I said, ticket?"

They pulled out the voucher and placed it in her hand.

The girl took it with a cursory glance. She sighed. "This isn't a ticket, it's a voucher."

"A voucher for passage," they replied. "I assume there's room on this voyage? The line wasn't that long."

The girl hummed, squinting up at the ship. She glanced over at the crew members lounging by the ticket booth.

"Yeah, whatever. Go ahead."

She stuffed the voucher into the pocket of her oversized crew pants. Crumpled corners—no doubt the tickets from those who had already embarked—peeked out. "Welcome aboard."

The figure nodded, hoisting their bag over the shoulder and looking up into the darkness of the ship above.

There was no time to send word. They would have to send a message from Lythenor, once the job was done.

The journey should take a week, but for some of the people embarking on this lovely autumn morning in Irdien, the next few days on the open sea would be their last.

The Star and her companion would not be making it to Lythenor.

They would make sure of it.

Zosia and Tytania will return.

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Liliana Pisarka is a world adventurer who loves finding magic in the mundane. She graduated with a B.A. in International Studies after attending eight universities and completing five study abroad programs. Wanderlust still unsated, she studied, worked, volunteered, and backpacked her way through twenty countries before settling in the USA with her wife. Her passion for adventure and love of worlds both real and fantastical are reflected in her stories.

When Liliana isn't writing, she can be found playing D&D, gobbling up baked goodies made by her talented wife, or having meowversations with their two fluffy cat-gremlins.

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ALSO BY LILIANA PISARKA

F(k)O(a)X•T(r)A(m)I(a)L

While on vacation with her boyfriend in Japan, Dahlia learns that the real monsters are not always what they appear to be. Through twists of fate and the fox-shaped form of karma, a young woman finds empowerment at the end of an abusive relationship.

FOX TAIL KARMA is a 17,000~ word novelette that dips into fantasy with a hearty scoop of horror mixed in.

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